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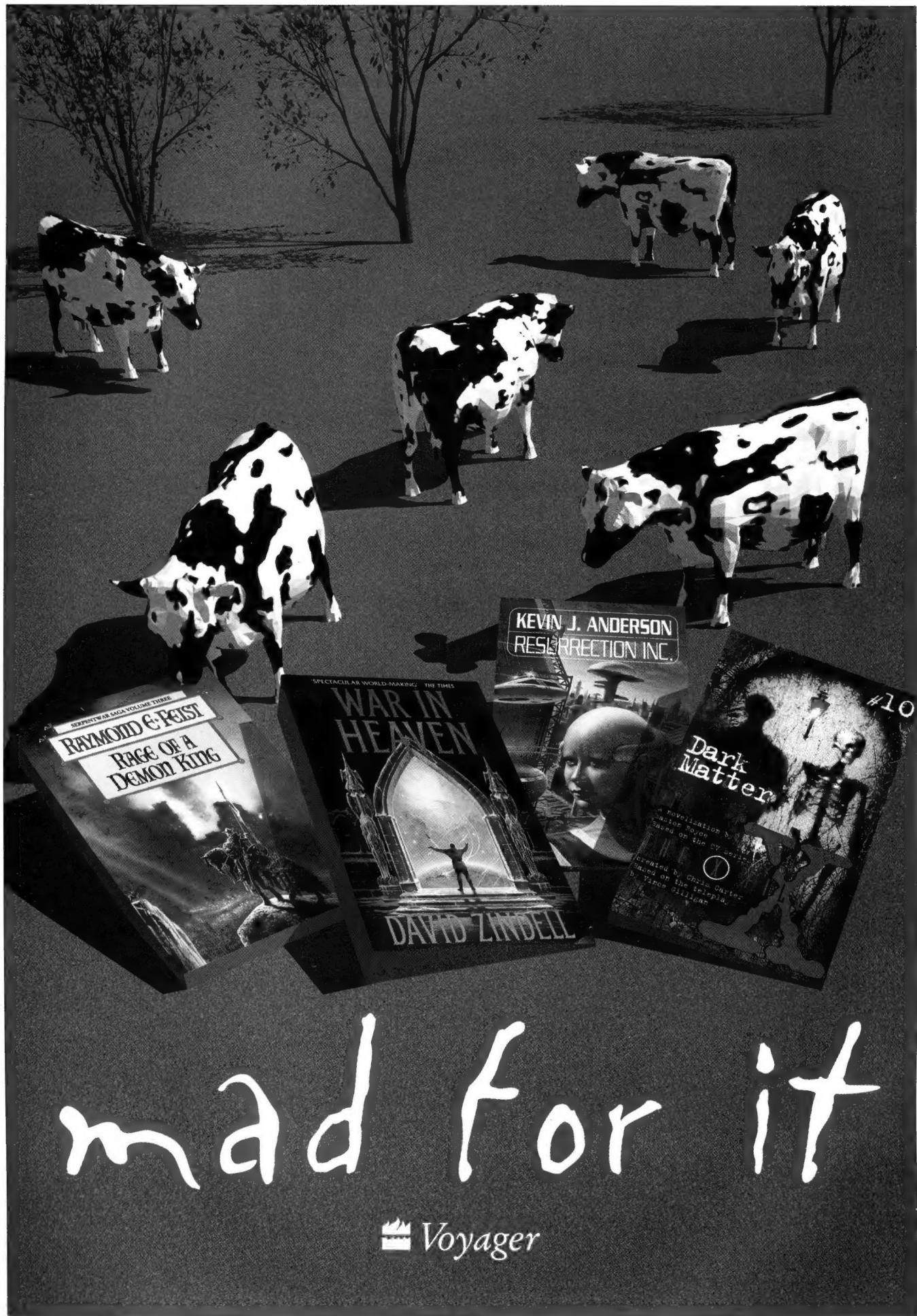
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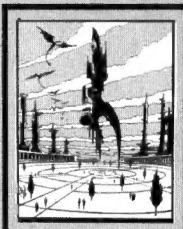
134

Interview with winner of
Arthur C. Clarke Award
Mary Doria Russell

plus new stories by
Cherry Wilder
Charles Stross
Alexander Glass
Alastair Reynolds
Michael Bishop
Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff







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interZone

August 1998

science fiction & fantasy

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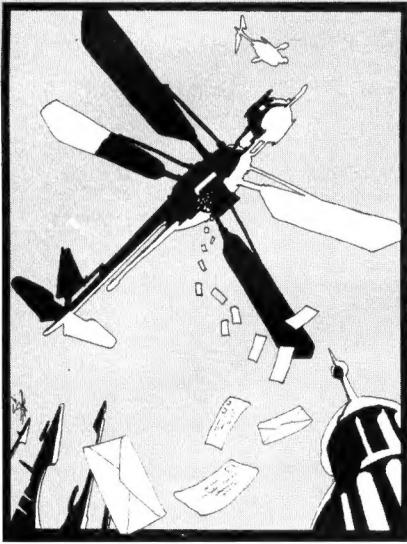
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++ Interaction ++

160 books and short stories, with a total of over 6,000,000 words claimed.

Wright (1874-1965) is of course best remembered for *The Amphibians*, *The World Below*, *Deluge* and one or two other sf novels that have seen fairly frequent reprints, but many of his books have been long out of print and almost impossible to find (and many were never issued here in the United States). They are now findable with a few keystrokes and mouse clicks...

Dennis Lien

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Editor: Yes, I was thinking of the Lambda Awards as well as the Tiptrees, and, yes, I was generalizing wildly. As for the small-press magazines, I was thinking of the obscure publications (or other sources) whose praising reviews are often quoted on the covers of the novels in question – some of these may not be real magazines, but electronic “e-zines” or whatever. Anyway, thanks for putting us straight, Dennis, and thanks too for drawing attention to the amazing S. Fowler Wright website – maintained by the author’s grandson, Gus Fowler Wright. The entire life’s work of the elder Fowler Wright is still in copyright but is now available absolutely free to anybody with a computer. In these days of ever-extending copyright and hence the increasing privatization of literature, would that more “literary estates” followed such an unselfish policy! This is truly the modern way to honour one’s distinguished writer-grandparent – and, perhaps, to keep his or her reputation alive.

Dear Editors:

I wasn’t altogether surprised to see a letter like Mike Cobley’s in *IZ* 132, as my initial knee-jerk reaction to spinoffery – which I use here in the sense of “novels set in a TV universe” – is quite similar. On the other hand, I found Paul Brazier’s reply quite reasonable: statistically, there has to be some good spinoffery, and if Cornell is writing it then more power to him.

I can’t deny the appeal of spinoffery to a fan of whichever show is being written about: I’ve written two stories for Virgin’s Dr Who *Decalog* series and I can testify to the thrill of having the Doctor twiddle the controls of the TARDIS *because you say so*. How much more fun it must be to have the *Enterprise* boldly go where you want it to, or have Mulder and Scully investigate your own pet conspiracy theory, or engage in sexual fantasies with the Doctor Who assistant of your choice. As Brazier rightly says, fans write it because they love it, not to get rich.

No, my gripe with spinoffery is two-fold. First of all, it’s a creative dead-end. If I write a story in a shared TV universe then I create very little, because everyone who is going to read it knows the background already. There’s no need to introduce the characters or give them a history. I don’t even have to say what the characters look like. This wouldn’t be a problem if I could direct all that left-over creative energy into the plot of the story... but no.

Spinoffery universes are canon and can’t be inconsistent (any more than they already are). However interesting the setting of a particular story, you can’t really explore the implications of the ideas, or imperil the main characters with any degree of doubt as to their eventual survival, or make interesting philosophical speculations about the nature of reality, because ultimately the big reset button in the sky will be pressed and everything at the end of the novel will be the same as it was at the start, ready for the next writer in line to make what he will of it.

(I’m simplifying. I’m aware that, for example, the Dr Who *New Adventures* do plot new courses for their stable of characters, and spinoffery in general does have the advantage of letting the characters be put in situations that greatly transcend the FX budget of the original series. But ultimately, however many detours there are between start and finish, you still end up where you began.)

If, on the other hand, I write a story set in my own universe then I’ve created *everything*: what’s more, I’ve created X versions of everything where X is the number of readers, because each one of them will imagine it slightly differently. Yes, I might use familiar tropes as building blocks – time machines, starships, hyperspace, crusading FBI agents – but I can do whatever I like with them in my own way. For a writer this has to be much, much more satisfying.

But this first (and deeply felt) gripe of mine pales into insignificance compared to the second, and that is the decoy effect that spinoffery has on original sf. As Wendy Bradley says in her TV review in *IZ* 132, apparently you don’t have to read sf to be an sf fan any more – it’s enough to watch it. And when these watchers do decide to exercise their brain cells and read, do they turn to Alfred Bester or Cordwainer Smith? No, they turn to what is essentially the continuation of their fave show by other means – the comfy security of spin-off novels. And they come to believe that this is what sf is all about.

(Again, I’m simplifying: I came to

Dear Editors:

Your “Books Received” notation of Severna Park’s novel in *Interzone* 132 makes the rather startling statement that “gender-bending sf” is “fast becoming a new sub-category of the genre in the USA, with its own system of awards, small-press magazines, etc.”

There is, of course, the James Tiptree Jr. Award, which is indeed set up to recognize what is often informally called “gender-bending sf (and fantasy),” but one award (even one sometimes, as this year, awarded to two finalists) does not a “system” make. I am at a loss to think of what other awards you see as part of this “system” – unless it’s the Lambda literary awards for gay male and/or lesbian sf, but while the winners of such often may include speculative “gender-bending” elements, that’s hardly what they are set up to judge.

Nor can I imagine what US small-press magazines you see as devoted to publishing gender-bending stuff; I can’t offhand even think of magazines devoted specifically to gay/lesbian/bi science fiction, though there probably are examples. Are you perchance lumping all feminist-oriented small-press sf magazines in with this more narrow subdivision? (My spouse was chair of this year’s Tiptree jury; I suspect that if there were whole magazines – and others in a “system of awards” – devoted to the sub-category, the jury’s task in locating and winnowing potential materials would have been a great deal easier!)

Another quibble from the same issue: while Robert Sawyer’s web page is indeed extremely impressive, it is not true (based on word count) that it is “the largest genre writer’s home page in existence.” Keith Brooke credits Sawyer’s page with some 350,000 words, while the page devoted to the works of Sydney Fowler Wright at <http://www.sfw.org/> contains, among other incidentals, the full text of some

Asimov and Clarke via the old Target Dr Who novelizations, so such a thing can happen. My defence is that, once I was weaned off spinoffery, I stayed off it – and spinoffery then was nowhere near the monster it is now.)

Writers of original fiction go through a process of Darwinian selection – good authors go on, bad ones fall by the wayside. Spinoffery is an artificial market that bolsters up the crap and smothers the good stuff if it dares to contradict the series canon. I can't comment on whether Paul Cornell is a good writer or not – I haven't read enough of his stuff to say – but the acid test will be to see an original Cornell novel on the bookshelves.

Ben Jeapes

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Dear Editors:

I read Wendy Bradley's review of the BBC series *Invasion Earth* twice, first with incredulity and then with the slowly dawning realization that she must have written it with her tongue planted firmly in her cheek.

Nothing else could account for her kindness towards work that is entertaining on a superficial level but that otherwise lacks one iota of originality or conviction. The series might well be acceptable sci-fi for the masses, because it is lightweight and undemanding, but for a decent science-fiction magazine like *IZ* to lend it credibility by rating it so highly only adds to my conviction that Wendy has pulled the wool over our eyes.

The story, such as it is (that's shallow and inconsistent like most TV series), is straight from the late 1950s and anyone who remembers the series *A for Andromeda* will know that the BBC managed much better almost 40 years ago. The acting is wooden and unconvincing, and all the principal characters are stereotypes of one sort or another: the loud-mouthed American officer; the female scientist who, operating from her own back room (or whatever it is), manages to make sense of something the experts almost overlook and, although capable, she has the vulnerability the stereotype demands as well; the rugged hero who's also a bit of a rebel; the cold female officer who has to prove she's stronger than any man – and so on. Haven't we seen them all before, too many times? Into this improbable stew, Jed Mercurio sprinkles a few 1970s sensibilities and a bit of 1990s technology and we're expected to accept that it's a major new drama series.

Am I the only one to think that good old Aunty would have done better to resurrect some successes from the past rather than countenance this load of twaddle? Why can't they show us *The Flip Side of Dominic Hyde* and its sequel *Another Flip for Dominic*,

The Stone Tapes, *The Year of the Sex Olympics* and other programmes that were made with some integrity and with some idea of adding real substance to science fiction as TV drama? I know we live in an age of TV drama as soap opera (that's why we don't get extended scenes any more and hop from one thread of the storyline to another every two or three minutes) so perhaps programmers believe the audience wouldn't be able to come to terms with a proper story, extended scenes and depth of characterization.

The BBC makes much of its alleged commitment to provide television programmes for everyone, so when are they going to put it into practice and give us some intelligent, home-produced science fiction for intelligent viewers, instead of yet another load of forgettable dross?

Jim Goddard

Driffield, East Yorkshire

http://freespace.virgin.net/jim.g/solaris.htm

Also check out "The Official Brian W. Aldiss Web Site": *http://freespace.virgin.net/jim.g/BWA/bwa.htm*

Dear Editors:

Thanks for *IZ* 132, received this morning, and for the discussion regarding my name ("Interaction," page 4). This is something which has been causing me no end of distress. I can't decide whether to stick with David L. or go the whole hog with David Lee (the boringly ordinary middle name). I appreciate your suggestion of "Larrikin," and I voiced this to a colleague. Unfortunately, his rendition of the name kept conjuring up visions of David Jason in *The Darling Buds of May* – and no aspiring writer deserves that, surely?

David L. Stone

Ramsgate, Kent

Dear Editors:

Gary Westfahl's "non-interactive" column in your May issue was especially interesting – not for its personalized attack on poor Geoff Ryman, nor for its fascinating revelation that at least one other person out there has read a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure book, but for his sudden and unexplained gender switch when he talks about the generic "author of interactive fiction."

Maybe I'm missing something, but isn't it the convention when talking about an anonymous example of a generic group like this to use the pronoun "he"? Gary's switch to "she" at this point is especially puzzling when all the interactive examples he mentions in his column were written by male authors. Does he have someone specific in mind? If so, who? I'm fascinated.

Of course, Gary might be simply making the point that female authors are just as "guilty" in the interactive-fiction stakes as male ones. If so, then I think he's missed

the perfect opportunity to show what he's getting at. What he really should have written was:

"In effect, <IF YOU ARE MALE, TURN TO PAGE 54. IF FEMALE, TURN TO PAGE 55> is criticising <IF YOU ARE MALE, TURN TO PAGE 56. IF FEMALE, TURN TO PAGE 57> own work, telling members of <IF YOU ARE MALE, TURN TO PAGE 56. IF FEMALE, TURN TO PAGE 57> audience that they are likely to value only a small fraction of what <IF YOU ARE MALE, TURN TO PAGE 54. IF FEMALE, TURN TO PAGE 55> has produced..." Where page 54 has: "he <NOW TURN BACK TO PAGE 52>"

page 55 has: "she <NOW TURN BACK TO PAGE 52>"

page 56 has: "his <NOW TURN BACK TO PAGE 52>"

page 57 has: "her <NOW TURN BACK TO PAGE 52>"

If you include special pages for transsexuals and hermaphrodites as well, then this becomes even more interesting. I think I've got the point now, Gary.

Katherine Roberts

Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire

Dear Editors:

In your May edition ("Interaction," *IZ* 131) Darrell Schweitzer added his thoughts to those of Gary Westfahl on the easy nature of writing Alternate Histories. I fear that I must disagree with both!

Their main complaint about Alternate History is that it is a cop-out for the "old and tired" by "comfy manipulation of the familiar." However, in my opinion it is those who believe the above that are showing signs of being old and tired.

It is fair to say that there is a load of tripe under the AH label. There is an awful lot of tripe under the general heading of science fiction as well. Gary Westfahl brought down particular opprobrium on Harry Turtledove for wasting time writing his AHs. Mr Westfahl seems to have totally ignored the fact that Turtledove is a professor of history, which shows up in his various Videssos cycles – in some of the best books of the last decade. I know that these are not really AHs. The same attention to detail is followed in his *Guns of the South* which follows through on the nature of the changes in a logical fashion, and it is this point that separates the best from the rest in all forms of writing. Regardless of the nature of the message, if the internal consistency of the story is awful, the story will be awful (I have tried reading Philip K. Dick's *Man in the High Castle* and found it rather impenetrable).

Despite these disagreements with Mr Westfahl, I have to say that the inclusion of his column within your hallowed pages has certainly warmed up your letters pages!

John Fairhurst

Stockport, Cheshire

STROBOSCOPIC

Alastair Reynolds



D.E.H.

“Open the box.”

I wasn't making a suggestion. Just in case the tone of my voice didn't make that clear, I backed up my words with an antique but functional blunderbuss; something won in a gaming tournament half a lifetime earlier. We stood in the airlock of my yacht, currently orbiting Venus: me, my wife and two employees of Icehammer Games.

Between us was a grey box the size of a child's coffin.

“After all this time,” said the closest man, his face hidden behind a mirrored gold visor on a rococo white helmet. “Still don't trust us?”

“First rule of complex systems,” I said. “You can't tell friends from enemies.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Nozomi.”

But even as he spoke, White knelt down and fiddled with the latches on the lid of the box. It opened with a gasp of air, revealing a mass of translucent protective sheeting wadded around something very cold. After passing the blunderbuss to Risa, I reached in and lifted out the package, feeling its bulk.

“What is it?”

“An element of a new game,” said the other man, Black. “Something called *Stroboscopic*.”

I carried the package to a workbench. “Never heard of it.”

“It's hush-hush,” Black said. “Company hopes to have it up and running in a few months. Rumour is it's unlike anything else in Tycho.”

I pulled back the last layer of wadding.

It was an animal packed in ice; some kind of hard-shelled arthropod; like a cross between a scorpion and a crab – all segmented exoskeletal plates and multi-jointed limbs terminating in various specialized and nasty-looking appendages. The dark carapace was mottled with patches of dirty white, sparkling with tiny reflections. Elsewhere it shone like polished tortoiseshell. There were ferocious mouth parts but nothing I recognized as an eye, or any kind of sensory organ at all.

“Looks delicious,” I said. “What do I cook it with?”

“You don't eat it, Nozomi. You play it.” Black shifted nervously, as if wary of how much he could safely disclose. “The game will feature a whole ecology of these things – dozens of other species; all kinds of predator-prey relationships.”

“Someone manufactures them?”

“Nah.” It was White speaking now. “Icehammer found 'em somewhere outside the system, using the snatcher.”

“Might help if I knew where.”

“Tough titty. They never told us; we're just one of dozens of teams working on the game.”

I couldn't help but laugh. “So you're saying, all I have to go on is one dead animal, which might have come from anywhere in the galaxy?”

“Yeah,” White said, his helmet nodding. “Except it isn't dead.”

The mere fact that I'd seen the creature, of course,



meant that I'd have an unfair advantage when it came to playing the game. It meant that I, Nozomi, one of the dozen or so best-known gamers in the system, would be cheating. But I could live with that. Though my initial rise to fame had been driven mainly by skill, it was years since I'd played a game without having already gained an unfair edge over the other competitors.

There were reasons.

I could remember a time in my childhood when the playing of games was not the highest pinnacle of our culture; simply one means by which rich immortals fought boredom. But that was before the IWP commenced the first in a long series of wars against the Halo Ideologues, those scattered communities waging dissent from the system's edge. The Inner Worlds Prefecture had turned steadily more totalitarian, as governments generally do in times of crisis. Stealthily, the games had been pushed towards greater prominence, and shady alliances had been forged between the IWP and the principal gaming houses. The games enthralled the public and diverted their attentions from the Halo wars. And – unlike the arts – they could not be used as vehicles for subversion. For gamers like myself it was a near-utopian state of affairs. We were pampered and courted by the houses and made immensely rich.

But – maybe because we'd been elevated to such loftiness – we also saw what was going on. And turning a blind eye was one of the few things I'd never been good at.

One day, five years ago, I was approached by the

same individuals who'd brought the box to my yacht. Although they were officially working for Icehammer, they were also members of an underground movement with cells in all the gaming houses. Its lines of communication stretched out to the Ideologues themselves.

The movement was using the games against the IWP. They'd approach players like myself and offer to disclose material relating to games under development by Icehammer or other houses; material which would give the player an edge over their rivals. The player in turn would siphon a percentage of their profit into the movement.

The creature in the box was merely the latest tip-off.

But I didn't know what to make of it, except that it had been snatched from somewhere in the galaxy. Wormhole manipulation offered instantaneous travel to the stars, but nothing larger than a beachball could make the trip. The snatcher was an automated probe which had retrieved biological specimens from thousands of planets. Icehammer operated its own snatcher, for obtaining material which could be incorporated into products.

This time, it seemed to have brought back a dud.

"It just sits there and does nothing," Risa said when the Icehammer employees had left, the thing resting on a chilled pallet in the sick bay.

"What kind of game can they possibly build around it?"

"Last player to die of boredom wins?"

"Possible. Or maybe you throw it? It's heavy enough, as though the damn thing is half-fossilized. Those white

patches look like quartz, don't they?"

Maybe the beast wouldn't do *anything* until it was placed into the proper environment – perhaps because it needed olfactory or tactile cues to switch from dormancy.

"Black said the game was based on an ecology," I said.

"Yeah, but how do you think such a game would work?" Risa said. "An ecology's much too chaotic to build into a game." Before she married me she'd been a prominent games designer for one of the other houses, so she knew what she was talking about. "Do you know how disequilibrate your average ecology is?"

"Not even sure I can pronounce it."

"Ecologies aren't kid's stuff. They're immensely complex – food webs, spectra of hierarchical connectedness... Screw up any one level, and the whole thing can collapse – unless you've evolved the system into some kind of Gaian self-stabilizing regime, which is hard enough even when you're not trying to recreate an alien ecology, where there might be all sorts of unexpected emergent phenomena."

"Maybe that's the point, though? A game of dexterity, like balancing spinning plates?"

Risa made the noise which told she was half acknowledging the probable truthfulness of my statement. "They must constrain it in some way. Strip it down to the essentials, and then build in some mechanism whereby players can influence things."

I nodded. I'd been unwilling to probe the creature too deeply until now, perhaps still suspicious of a trap – but I knew that if I didn't the little arthropod would drive me quietly insane. At the very least, I had to know whether it had anything resembling a brain – and if I got that far, I could begin to guess at the kinds of behavioural routines scripted into its synapses, especially if I could trace pathways to sensory organs. Maybe I was being optimistic, though. The thing didn't even have recognizable eyes, so it was anyone's guess as to how it assembled a mental model of its surroundings. And of course that told me something, though it wasn't particularly useful.

The creature had evolved somewhere dark.

A month later, Icehammer began a teaser campaign for *Stroboscopic*. The premiere was to take place two months later in Tycho, but a handful of selected players would be invited to an exclusive preview a few weeks earlier, me among them.

I began to warm up to competition fitness.

Even with insider knowledge, no game was ever a walkover, and my contacts in the resistance movement would be disappointed if I didn't turn in a tidy profit. The trouble was I didn't know enough about the game to finesse the required skills; whether they were mental or physical or some combination of the two. Hedging my bets, I played as many different types of game as possible in the timeframe, culminating in a race through the atmosphere of Jupiter piloting frail cloud-jammers. The game was one that demanded acute grasp of aerodynamic physics, coupled with sharp reflexes and a willingness to indulge in extreme personal risk.

It was during the last of the races that Angela Valdez misjudged a thermal and collapsed her foil. Valdez had

been a friend of mine years ago, and though we'd since fallen into rivalry, we'd never lost our mutual respect. I attended her funeral on Europa with an acute sense of my own mortality. There, I met most of the other gamers in the system, including a youngish man called Zubek whose star was in the ascendant. He and Valdez had been lovers, I knew – just as I'd loved her years before I met Risa.

"I suppose you've heard of *Stroboscopic*?" he asked, sidling up to me after Valdez's ashes had been scattered on Europa's ice.

"Of course."

"I presume you won't be playing, in that case." Zubek smiled. "I gather the game's going to be more than slightly challenging."

"You think I'm not up to it?"

"Oh, you were good once, Nozomi – nobody'd dispute that." He nodded to the smear of ash on the frost. "But so was Angela. She was good enough to beat the hardest of games – until the day when she wasn't."

I wanted to punch him. What stopped me was the thought that maybe he was right.

I was on my way back from the funeral when White called, using the secure channel to the yacht.

"What have you learnt about the package, Nozomi? I'm curious."

"Not much," I said, nibbling a fingernail. With my other hand I was toying with Risa's dreadlocks, her head resting on my chest. "Other than the fact that the animal responds to light. The mottled patches on its carapace are a matrix of light-sensitive organs; silicon and quartz deposits. Silicon and silicon oxides, doped with a few other metals. I think they work as organic semiconductors, converting light into electrical nerve impulses."

I couldn't see White's face – it was obscured by a golden blur which more or less approximated the visor of his suit – but he tapped a finger against the blur, knowingly. "That's all? A response to light? That's hardly going to give you a winning edge."

"There's nothing simple about it. The light has to reach a certain threshold intensity before there's any activity at all."

"And then it wakes up?"

"No. It moves for a few seconds, like a clockwork toy given a few turns of the key. Then it freezes up again, even if the light level remains constant. It needs a period of darkness before it shows another response to light."

"How long?"

"Seventy seconds, more or less. I think it gets all the energy it needs during that one burst of light, then goes into hibernation until the next burst. Its chemistry must be optimized so highly that it simply can't process more rapid bursts."

The gold ovoid of his face nodded. "Maybe that ties in with the title of the game," he said. "*Stroboscopic*."

"You wouldn't care to hazard a guess as to what kind of evolutionary adaptation this might be?"

"I wish there was time for it, Nozomi. But I'm afraid that isn't why I called. There's trouble."

"What sort?" Though I didn't really need to ask.

He paused, looking to one side as if nervous of being

interrupted. "Black's vanished. My guess is the goons got to him. They'll have unpicked his memory by now."

"I'm sorry."

"It may be hazardous for you to risk competition now that you're implicated."

I let the words sink in, then shook my head. "It's too late," I said. "I've already given them my word that I'll be there."

Risa stirred. "Too pig-headed to back down?"

"No," I said. "But on the other hand, I do have a reputation to uphold."

As the premiere approached we learned what we could of the creature. It was happier in vacuum than air, although the latter did not seem to harm it provided it was kept cold. Maybe that had something to do with its silicon biochemistry. Silicon had never seemed like a likely rival to carbon as a basis for life, largely because silicon's higher valency denied its compounds the same long-term stability. But under extreme cold, silicon biochemistry might have the edge, or at least be an equally probable pathway for evolution. And with silicon came the possibility to exploit light itself as an energy source, with no clumsy intermediate molecular machinery like the rhodopsin molecule in the human retina.

But the creature lived in darkness.

I couldn't resolve this paradox. It needed light to energize itself – a flash of intense blue light, shading into the UV – and yet it hadn't evolved an organ as simple as the eye. The eye, I knew, had been invented at least 40 times during the evolution of life on Earth. Nature came up with the eye whenever there was the slightest use for it.

It got stranger.

There was something I called the secondary response – also triggered by exposure to light. Normally, shown a flash every 70-odd seconds, the animal would execute a few seemingly purposeful movements, each burst of locomotion co-ordinated with the previous one, implying that the creature kept some record of what it had been doing previously. But if we allowed it to settle into a stable pattern of movement bursts, the creature began to show richer behaviour. The probability of eliciting the secondary response rose to a maximum midway through the gap between normal bursts, roughly half a minute after the last, before smoothly diminishing. But at its peak, the creature was hypersensitized to any kind of ambient light at all, even if it was well below the threshold energy of the normal flash. If no light appeared during the time of hypersensitivity, nothing happened; the creature simply waited out the remaining half a minute until the next scheduled flash. But if even a few hundred photons fell on its carapace, it would always do the same thing; thrashing its limbs violently for a few seconds, evidently drawing on some final reserve of energy which it saved for just this response.

I didn't have a clue why.

And I wasn't going to get one, either – at least not by studying the creature. One day we'd set it up in the autodoc analysis chamber as usual, and we'd locked it into the burst cycle, working in complete darkness apart from the regular pulses of light every minute and ten seconds. But we forgot to lash the animal down



properly. A status light flashed on the autodoc console, signifying some routine health-monitoring function. It wasn't bright at all, but it happened just when the creature was hypersensitized. It thrashed its limbs wildly, making a noise like a box of chopsticks.

And hurled itself from the chamber, falling to the floor.

Even though it was dark, I saw something of its shattering, as it cleaved into a million pieces. It sparkled as it died.

"Oops," Risa said.

The premiere soon arrived. Games took place all over the system, but the real epicentre was Tycho. The lunar crater had been domed, pressurized and infused with a luminous mass of habitats and biomes, all dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure through game. I'd visited the place dozens of times, of course – but even then, I'd experienced only a tiny fraction of what it had to offer. Now all I wanted to do was get in and out – and if *Stroboscopic* was the last game I ever played there, I didn't mind.

"Something's bothering you, Noz," Risa said, as we took a monorail over the Icehammer zone. "Ever since you came back from Valdez's funeral."

"I spoke to Zubek."

"Him?" She laughed. "You've got more talent in your dick."

"He suggested I should consider giving this one a miss."

"He's just trying to rile you. Means you still scare him." Then she leaned towards the window of our private cabin. "There. The Arena."

It was a matt-black geodesic ball about half a kilometre wide, carbuncled by ancillary buildings. Searchlights scissored the air above it, neon letters spelling out the name of the game, running around the ball's circumference.

Stroboscopic.

Thirty years ago the eponymous CEO of Icehammer Games had been a top-class player in his own right – until neural feedback incinerated most of his higher motor functions. Now Icehammer's frame was cradled within a powered exoskeleton, stencilled with luminous Chinese dragons. He greeted myself, the players and assorted hangers-on as we assembled in an atrium adjoining the Arena. After a short preliminary speech a huge screen was unveiled behind him. He stood aside and let the presentation roll.

A drab, wrinkled planet hove into view on the screen, lightly sprinkled with craters; one icecap poking into view.

"PSR-J2034+454A," Icehammer said. "The decidedly unpoetic name for a planet nearly 500 light-years from here. Utterly airless and barely larger than our moon, it shouldn't really be there at all. Less than ten million years ago its sun reached the end of its nuclear-burning life cycle and went supernova." He clapped his hands together in emphasis; some trick of acoustics magnifying the clap concussively. "Apart from a few comets, nothing else remains. The planet moves in total darkness, even starlight attenuated by the nebula of dust which embeds the system. Even the star it once drew life from has become a corpse."

The star rose above one limb of the planet: a searing point of light, pulsing on and off like a beacon.

"A pulsar," Icehammer said. "A 15-kilometre ball of nuclear matter, sending out an intense beam of light as it rotates, four flashes a second; each no more than 13 hundredths of a second long. The pulsar has a wobble in its rotational axis, however, which means that the beam only crosses our line of sight once every 72 seconds, and then only for a few seconds at a time." Then he showed us how the pulsar beam swept across the surface of the planet, dousing it in intense, flickering light for a few instants, outlining every nuance of the planet's topography in eye-wrenching violet. Followed by utter darkness on the face of the world, for another 72 seconds.

"Now the really astonishing thing," Icehammer said, "is that something evolved to live on the planet, although only on the once face which it always turns to the star. A whole order of creatures, in fact, their biology tuned to exploit that regular flash of light. Now we believe that life on Earth originated in self-replicating structures in pyritic minerals, or certain kinds of clay. Eventually, this mineralogic life formed the scaffolding for the first form of carbon-based life, which – being more efficient and flexible – quickly usurped its predecessor. But perhaps that genetic takeover never happened here, stymied by the cold and the vacuum and the radiative effects of the star." Now he showed us holo-images of the creatures themselves, rendered in the style of watercolours from a naturalist's fieldbook, annotated in handwritten Latin. Dozens of forms – including several radically different bodyplans and modes of locomotion – but everything was hard-shelled and a clear cousin to the animal we'd examined on the yacht. Some of the more obvious predators looked incredibly fearsome. "They do all their living in bursts lasting a dozen seconds, punctuated by nearly a minute of total inactivity. Evidently some selection mechanism determined that a concentrated burst of activity is more useful than long, drawn-out mobility."

Jumping, I thought. You couldn't jump in slow motion. Predators must have been the first creatures to evolve toward the burst strategy – and then grazers had been forced to follow suit.

"We've given them the collective term Strobelife – and their planet we've called Strobeworld, for obvious reasons." Icehammer rubbed his palms together with a whine of actuating motors. "Which, ladies and gentlemen, brings us rather neatly to the game itself. Shall we continue?"

"Get on with it you bastard," I murmured. Next to me, Risa squeezed my hand and whispered something calming.

We were escorted up a sapphire staircase into a busy room packed with consoles and viewing stands. There was no direct view of the Arena itself, but screens hanging from the ceiling showed angles in various wavebands.

The Arena was a mockup of part of the surface of Strobeworld, simulated with astonishing precision: the correct rocky terrain alleviated only by tufts of colourless vacuum-tolerant "vegetation," gravity that was only a few percent from Strobeworld's own, and a magnetic

field which simulated in strength and vector the ambient field at the point on Strobeworld from which the animals had been snatched. The roof of the dome was studded with lamps which would blaze for less than 13 hundredths of a second, once every 72 seconds, precisely mimicking the passage of the star's mercilessly bright beam.

The game itself – Level One, at least – would be played in rounds: single player against single player, or team against team. Each competitor would be allocated a fraction of the thousand-odd individual animals released into the Arena at the start – fifty/fifty in the absence of any handicapping. The sample would include animals from every ecological level, from grazers which fed on the flora, right up to the relatively scarce top predators, of which there were only a dozen basic variants. They had to eat, of course: light could provide their daily energy needs, but they'd still need to consume each other for growth and replication. Each competitor's animals would be labelled with infrared markers, capable of being picked up by Arena cams. It was the competitor's goal to ensure that their population of Strobeworld creatures outperformed the rival's, simply by staying alive longest. Computers would assess the fitness of each population after a round and the winner would be announced.

I watched a few initial heats before my turn.

Most of the animals were sufficiently far from each other – or huddled in herds – that during each movement burst they did little except shuffle around or move slightly more in one direction than another. But the animals which were near each other exhibited more interesting behaviour. Prey creatures – small, flat-bodied grazers or mid-level predators – would try and get away from the higher-level predators, which in turn would advance toward the grazers and subordinate predators. But then they'd come to a stop, perfectly motionless, their locations revealed only by the cams, since it was completely dark in the Arena.

Waiting.

It was harder than it looked – the dynamics of the ecosystem far subtler than I'd expected. Interfering at any level could have wildly unexpected consequences.

Risa would have loved it.

Soon it was my turn. I took my console after nodding briefly at my opponent; a rising player of moderate renown, but no real match for myself, even though neither of us had played *Stroboscopic* before.

We commenced play.

The Arena – initially empty – was populated by Strobelife via robot drones which dashed out from concealed hatches. The Strobelife was in stasis; no light flashes from the dome to trigger the life cycle; as stiff and sculptural as the animal we'd studied in the yacht. My console displayed a schematic overlay of the Arena, with "my" animals designated by marker symbols. The screens showed the same relationships from different angles. Initial placement was pseudo-random; animals placed in lifelike groupings, but with distances between predator and prey, determined by algorithms compiled from real Strobeworld populations.

We were given five minutes to study the grouping and evolve a strategy before the first flash. Thereafter, the flashes would follow at 72-second intervals until the

game's conclusion.

The five minutes slammed past before I'd examined less than a dozen possible opening gambits.

For a few flash cycles nothing much happened; too much distance between potential enemies. But after the fifth cycle some of the animals were within striking range of each other. Little local hotspots of carnage began to ensue; animals being dismembered or eaten in episodic bursts.

We began to influence the game. After each movement burst – during the minute or so of near-immobility – we were able to selectively reposition or withdraw our own or our opponent's animals from the Arena, according to a complex shifting value scheme. The immobile animals would be spirited away, or relocated, by the same robots which had placed them initially. When the next flash came, play would continue seamlessly.

All sorts of unanticipated things could happen.

Wipe out one predator and you might think that the animals it was preying on would thrive, or at least not be decimated so rapidly. But what often happened was that a second rival predator – until then contained in number – would invade the now unoccupied niche and become *more successful* than the animal which had been wiped out. If that new predator also pursued the prey animals of the other, then they might actually be worse off.

I began to grasp some of *Stroboscopic*'s latent complexity. Maybe it was going to be a challenge after all.

I played and won four rounds out of five. No point deluding myself: at least two of my victories had been sheer luck, or had evolved from dynamics of the ecology which were just too labyrinthine to guess at. But I was impressed, and for the first time in years, I didn't feel as if I'd already exhausted every aspect of a game.

I was enjoying myself.

I waited for the other heats to cycle through, my own name only displaced from the top of the leader board when the last player had completed his series.

Zubek had beaten me.

"Bad luck," he said, in the immediate aftermath, after we'd delivered our soundbytes. He slung an arm around my shoulder, matishly. "I'm sorry what I said about you before, Nozomi."

"Would you be apologizing now if I'd won?"

"But you didn't did you? Put up a good fight, I'll admit. Were you playing to your limit?" Zubek stopped a passing waiter and snatched two drinks from his tray, something fizzy, passing one to me. "Listen, Nozomi. Either way, we won in style and trashed the rest."

"Good. Can I go now? I'd like to speak to my wife." And get the hell away from Tycho, I thought.

"Not so fast. I've got a proposition. Will you hear me out?"

I listened to what Zubek had to say. Then caught up with Risa a few minutes later and told her what he had outlined.

"You're not serious," she said. "He's playing a game with you, don't you realize?"

"Isn't that the point?"

Risa shook her head exasperatedly. "Angela Valdez is dead. She died a good death, doing what she loved.

Nothing the two of you can do now can make the slightest difference."

"Zubek will make the challenge whether I like it or not."

"But you don't have to agree." Her voice was calm but her eyes promised tears. "You know what the rumours said. That the next level was more dangerous than the first."

"That'll make it all the more interesting, then."

But she wasn't really listening to me, perhaps knowing that I'd already made my mind up.

Zubek and I arranged a press conference an hour later, sharing the same podium, microphones radiating out from our faces like the rifles of a firing squad; stroboscopic flashes of cameras prefiguring the game ahead. We explained our proposition: how we'd agreed between ourselves to another game; one that would be dedicated to the memory of Angela Valdez.

But that we'd be playing Level Two.

Icehammer took the podium during the wild applause and cheering that followed our announcement.

"This is extremely unwise," he said, still stiffly clad in his mobility frame. "Level Two is hardly tested yet; there are bound to be bugs in the system. It could be exceedingly dangerous." Then he smiled and a palpable aura of relief swept through the spectators. "On the other hand, my shareholders would never forgive me if I forewent an opportunity for publicity like this."

The cheers rose to a deafening crescendo.

Shortly afterwards I was strapped in to the console, with neuro-effectors crowning my skull, ready to light up my pain centre. The computer overseeing the game would allocate jolts of pain according to the losses suffered by my population of Strobelife. All in the mind, of course. But that wouldn't make the pain any less agonizing, and it wouldn't reduce the chances of my heart simply stopping at the shock of it all.

Zubek leant in and shook my hand.

"For Angela," I said, and then watched as they strapped Zubek in the adjacent console, applying the neuro-effector.

It was hard. It wasn't just the pain. The game was made more difficult by deliberately limiting our overview of the Arena. I no longer saw my population in its entirety – the best I could do was hop my point of view from creature to creature, my visual field offering a simulation of the electrical-field environment sensed by each Strobelife animal; a snapshot only updated during Strobetaime. When there was no movement, there was no electrical-field generation. Most of the time I was blind.

Most of the time I was screaming.

Yet somehow – when the computer assessed the fitness of the two populations – I was declared the winner over Zubek.

Lying in the couch, my body quivered, saliva water-falling from my slack jaw. A moan filled the air, which it took me long moments to realize was my own attempt at vocalization. And then I saw something odd; something that shouldn't have happened at all.

Zubek hauled himself from his couch, not even sweating.

He didn't look like a man who'd just been through

agony.

An unfamiliar face blocked my view of him. I knew who it was, just from his posture and the cadences of his speech.

"Yes, you're right. Zubek was never wired into the neuro-effector. He was working for us – persuading you to play Level Two."

"White," I slurred. "You, isn't it?"

"The very man. Now, how would you like to see your wife alive?"

I reached for his collar, fingers grasping ineffectually at the fabric. "Where's Risa?"

"In our care, I assure you. Now kindly follow me."

He waited while I heaved myself from the enclosure of the couch, my legs threatening to turn to jelly beneath me.

"Oh, dear," White said, wrinkling his nose. "You've emptied your bladder, haven't you?"

"I'll empty your face if you don't shut up."

My nervous system had just about recovered by the time we reached Icehammer's quarters, elsewhere in the building. But my belief system was still in ruins.

White was working for the IWP.

Icehammer was lounging on a maroon settee, divested of his exoskeletal support system. Just as I was marvelling at how pitiable he looked, he jumped up and strode to me, extending a hand.

"Good to meet you, Nozomi."

I nodded at the frame, racked on one wall next to an elaborate suit of armour. "You don't need that thing?"

"Hell, no. Not in years. Good for publicity though – neural burn-out and all that."

"It's a setup, isn't it?"

"How do you think it played?" Icehammer said.

"Black really was working for the movement," I said, aware that I was compromising myself with each word, but also that it didn't matter. "White wasn't. You were in hock to the IWP all along. You were the reason Black vanished."

"Nothing personal, Nozomi," White said. "They got to my family, just as we've got to Risa."

Icehammer took over: "She's in our care now, Nozomi – quite unharmed, I assure you. But if you want to see her alive, I advise that you pay meticulous attention to my words." While he talked he brushed a hand over the tabard of the hanging suit of armour, leaving a greasy imprint on the black metal. "You disappointed me. That a man of your talents should be reduced to cheating."

"I didn't do it for myself."

"You don't seriously imagine that the movement could possibly pose a threat to the IWP? Most of its cells have been infiltrated. Face it man, it was always an empty gesture."

"Then where was the harm?"

Icehammer tried a smile but it looked fake. "Obviously I'm not happy at your exploiting company secrets, even if you were good enough to keep them largely to yourself."

"It's not as if I sold them on."

"No, I'll credit you with discretion, if nothing else. But even if I thought killing you might be justified, there'd be grave difficulties with such a course of action. You're too well-known; I can't just make you disappear with-

out attracting a lot of attention. And I can't expose you as a cheat without revealing the degree to which my organization's security was breached. So I'm forced to another option – one that, on reflection, will serve the both of us rather well."

"Which is?"

"I'll let Risa go, provided you agree to play the next level of the game."

I thought about that for a few moments before answering. "That's all? Why the blackmail?"

"Because no one in their right minds would play Level Three if they knew what was involved." Icehammer toyed with the elegantly flared cuff of his bottle-green smoking jacket. "The third level is exponentially more hazardous than the second. Of course, it will eventually draw competitors – but no one would consent to playing it until they'd attained total mastery of the lower levels. We don't expect that to happen for at least a year. You, on the other hand, flushed with success at beating Zubek, will rashly declare your desire to play Level Three. And in the process of doing so you will probably die, or at the very least be severely maimed."

"I thought you said it would serve me well."

"I meant your posthumous reputation." Icehammer raised a finger. "But don't imagine that the game will be rigged, either. It will completely fair, by the rules."

Feeling sick to my stomach, I still managed a smile. "I'll just have to cheat, then, won't I?"

A few minutes later I stood at the podium again, a full audience before me, and read a short prepared statement. There wasn't much to it, and as I hadn't written a word of it, I can't say that I injected any great enthusiasm into proceedings.

"I'm retiring," I said, to the hushed silence in the atrium. "This will be my last competition."

Muted cheers. But they quickly died away.

"But I'm not finished yet. Today I played the first two levels of what I believe will be one of the most challenging and successful games in Tycho, for many years to come. I now intend to play the final level."

Cheers followed again – but they were still a little fearful. I didn't blame them. What I was doing was insane.

Icehammer came out – back in his frame again – and made some half-hearted protestations, but the charade was even more theatrical than last time. Nothing could be better for publicity than my failing to complete the level – except possibly my death.

I tried not to think about that part.

"I admire your courage," he said, turning to the audience. "Give it up for Nozomi – he's a brave man!" Then he whispered in my ear: "Maybe we'll auction your body parts."

But I kept on smiling my best shit-eating smile, even as they wheeled in the same suit of armour that I'd seen hanging on Icehammer's wall.

I walked into the Arena, the armour's servo-assisted joints whirring with each step. The suit was heated and pressurized, of course – but the tiny air-circulator was almost silent, and the ease of walking meant that my own exertions were slight.



The Arena was empty of Strobelife now, brightly lit; dusty topsoil like lunar regolith, apart from the patches of flora. I walked to the spot which had been randomly assigned me, designated by a livid red circle.

Icehammer's words still rang in my ears. "You don't even know what happens in Level Three, do you?"

"I'm sure you're going to enjoy telling me."

"Level One is abstracted – the Arena is observed, but it might as well be taking place in a computer. Level Two's a little more visceral, as you're now well aware – but there's still no actual physical risk to the competitor. And of course even Level Two could be simulated. You must have asked yourself that question, Nozomi? Why create a real ecology of Strobelife creatures at all, if you're never going to enter it?"

That was when he had drawn my attention to the suit of armour. "You'll wear this. It'll offer protection against the vacuum and the effects of the pulse, but don't delude yourself that the armour itself is much more than cosmetic."

"I'm going into the Arena?"

"Where else? It's the logical progression. Now your viewpoint will be entirely limited to one participant in the game – yourself."

"Get it over with."

"You'll still have the ability to intervene in the ecology, just as before – the commands will be interpreted by your suit and transmitted to the controlling computer. The added complexity, of course, is that you'll have to structure your game around your own survival at each step."

"And if – when – I win?"

"You'll be reunited with Risa, I promise. Free to go. All the rest. You can even sell your story, if you can find anyone who'll believe you."

"Know a good ghostwriter?"

He'd winked at me then. "Enjoy the game, Nozomi. I know I will."

Now I stood on my designated spot and waited.

The lights went out.

I had a sense of rapid subliminal motion all around me. The drones were whisking out and positioning the inert Strobelife creatures in their initial formations. The process lasted a few seconds, performed in total silence. I could move, but only within the confines of the suit, which had now become rigid apart from my fingers.

Unguessable minutes passed.

Then the first stammering pulse came, bright as a nuclear explosion, even with the visor's shielding. My suit lost its rigidity, but for a moment I didn't dare move. On the faceplate's head-up display I could see that I was surrounded by Strobelife creatures, rendered according to their electrical field properties. There were grazers and predators and all the intermediates, and they all seemed to be moving in my direction.

And something was dreadfully wrong. *They were too big.*

I'd never asked myself whether the creature we'd examined on the yacht was an adult. Now I knew it wasn't.

The afterflash of the flash died from my vision, and as the seconds crawled by the creatures' movements became steadily more sluggish, until only the smallest of them were moving at all.

Then they too locked into immobility.

As did my suit, its own motors deactivating until triggered by the next flash.

I tried to hold the scene in my memory, recalling the large predator whose foreclaw might scythe within range of my suit, if he was able to lurch three or four steps closer to me during the next pulse. I'd have to move fast, when it came – and on the pulse after that, I'd have another two to contend with, nearing me on my left flank.

The flash came – intense and eye-hurting.

No shadows; almost everything washed out in the brilliance. Maybe that was why Strobelife had never evolved the eye: it was too bright for contrast, offering no advantage over electrical field sensitivity.

The big predator – a cross between a tank, armadillo and lobster – came three steps closer and slammed his foreclaw into a wide arc that grazed my chest. The impact hit me like a bullet.

I fell backwards, into the dirt, knowing that I'd broken a rib or two.

The electrical field overlay dwindled to darkness. My suit seized into rigidity.

Think, Noz. Think.

My hand grasped something. I could still move my fingers, if nothing else. The gloves were the only articulated parts of the suit that weren't slaved to the pulse cycle.

I was holding something hard, rocklike. But it wasn't a rock. My fingers traced the line of a carapace; the piplike fluting around the legs. It was a small grazer.

An idea formed in my mind. I thought of what Icehammer had said about the Strobeworld system; how there was nothing apart from the planet, the pulsar and a few comets.

Sooner or later, one of those comets would crash into the star. It might not happen very often, maybe only once every few years, but when it did it would be very bad indeed: a massive flare of X-rays as the comet was shredded by the gravitational field of the pulsar. It would be a pulse of energy far more intense than the normal flash of light; too energetic for the creatures to absorb.

Strobelife must have evolved a protection mechanism.

The onset of a major flare would be signalled by visible light, as the comet began to break up. A tiny glint at first, but harbinger of far worse to come. The creatures would be sensitized to burrow into the topdirt at the first sign of light which did not come at the expected time...

I'd already seen the reaction in action. It was what had driven the thrashing behaviour of our specimen, before it dropped to its death on the cabin floor. It had been trying to burrow; to bury itself in topdirt before the storm came.

The Arena wasn't Strobeworld, just a clever facsimile of it – and there was no longer any threat from an X-ray burst. But the evolved reflex would remain, hard-wired into every animal in the ecology.

All I had to do was trigger it.

The next flash came, like the brightest, quickest dawn imaginable. Ignoring the pain in my chest, I stood up – still holding the little grazer in my gloved hand.

But how could I trigger it? I'd need a source of light, albeit small, but I'd need to have it go off when I was completely immobile.

There was a way.

The predator lashed at me again, gouging into my leg. I began to topple, but forced myself to stay upright, if nothing else. Another gouge, painful this time, as if the leg armour was almost lost.

The electrical overlay faded again, and my suit froze into immobility. I began to count aloud in my head.

I'd remembered something. It had seemed completely insignificant at the time; a detail so trivial that I was barely conscious of committing it to memory. When the specimen had shattered, it had done so in complete darkness. And yet I'd seen it happen. I'd seen glints of light as it smashed into a million fragments.

And now I understood. The creature's quartz deposits were highly crystalline. And sometimes – when crystals are stressed – they release light; something called piezoluminescence. Not much; only the amount corresponding to the energy levels of electrons trapped deep within lattices – but I didn't need much, either. Not if I waited until the proper time, when the animals would be hypersensitized to that warning glint. I counted to 35, what I judged to be half way between the flash intervals. And then let my fingers relax.

The grazer dropped in silence toward the floor.

I didn't hear it shatter, not in vacuum. But in the

total darkness in which I was immersed, I couldn't miss the sparkle of light.

I felt the ground rumble all around me. Half a minute later, when the next flash came from the ceiling, I looked around.

I was alone.

No creatures remained, apart from the corpses of those which had already died. Instead, there were a lot of rocky mounds, where even the largest of them had buried themselves under topdirt. Nothing moved, except for a few pathetic avalanches of disturbed dirt. And there they'd wait, I knew – for however long it was evolution had programmed them to sit out the X-ray flare.

Thanks to the specimen on the yacht, I happened to know exactly how long that time was. Slightly more than four and a half hours.

Grinning to myself, knowing that Nozomi had done it again – cheated and made it look like winner's luck – I began to stroll to safety, and to Risa.

Alastair Reynolds, from Wales but now living in the Netherlands, has written a number of stories for *Interzone*, the most recent being "A Spy in Europa" (issue 120) – chosen by Gardner Dozois for his 1998 year's-best sf anthology – and "On the Oodnadatta" (issue 128). Recently, he completed his first novel.

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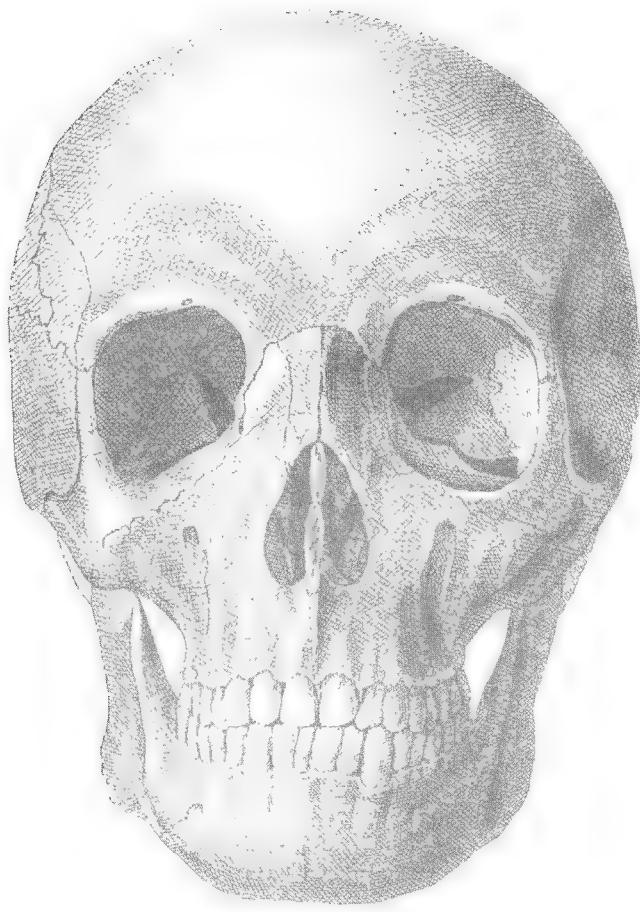
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Sequel on Skorpiós

Michael Bishop



i. Yeshua has died, an old man with tangled nose hairs and rotten teeth. I place two of Caesar's denarii on his eyes, to blind his death-stare. Soon, in this Ionian island's fierce heat, his body will release the first odours of its corruption.

Many people believe that Yeshua died forty years ago on a cross on Skull Mount outside Jerusalem. Many others believe that two days later he rose from his tomb, not as a ghost but as a death-changed cutting of God's selfsame vine. In truth, Yeshua did not die on that cross, and so had no call to come alive again. Our plot entailed bribing two Roman soldiers and so much risk to so many others that even now I marvel that we accomplished it.

In our hovel on Skorpiós, the dead Yeshua hardly resembles the young rabbi whom the soldiers scoured that day, pressing a mock crown onto his head and scarring his back with flails. The crown's thorns and those flails dripped with an opiate I had boiled out of a wilderness lichen. This substance helped Yeshua endure the pain of crucifixion and lapse by the gradual slowing of his heart into a limpness akin to death.

One bribed soldier argued against breaking Yeshua's legs. "He's gone," he said. "Why waste more effort on him?" When another legionary crowed, "For the fun of it," our soldier, to stymie a worse assault, stabbed Yeshua under the ribs with his spear, delivering another dose of opiate. This sustained his deathlike slumber until Sunday morning.

But on Friday evening, Joseph of Arimathea came with an ox cart and several women to Skull Mount, to take Yeshua from the cross. I also came, in woman's garb, and wrestled him into the cart. Later, I carried him into the garden tomb. After I laid him out there, Mary, Mary of Magdala, and Joanna massaged his body with spices and bound him in clean linen strips.

Tonight Yeshua's aged corpse has none of his younger self's poignant beauty. (What foolishness, attempting to reform the corrupt Judean religion by shamming a death and a return!) In its fleeting slumber, his crucified body had appeared ready to soar out of itself on viewless wings. How did so lovely a man dwindle into this grizzled wreck?

In this wise:

On that long-ago Sunday, Joseph and I crept into the tomb through a hidden tunnel. When Yeshua awoke, we unwrapped his body, robed him, and led him back out to a juniper grove several hundred paces away. From there, Yeshua fled, at length reaching Nazareth in Galilee. Meanwhile, some soldiers moved the tomb's stone (for a rumour had spread, that someone would steal the body) and found nothing inside but Yeshua's discarded wrappings.

Mary and the other women appeared. They lied to Cephas and Jonah Bar-Zebedee, who told their story to the others. Soon, unlikely glimpses of the risen Yeshua occurred, recurred, and convinced. Thomas Didymus, a pious fool who did not even like to gut a haddock, claimed to have thrust his hand into Yeshua's ugly spear wound.

Later, on a Galilean mountain where the rabbi had given his most famous sermon, we feigned a resurrection event. Even more people believed. When the Romans came to investigate, Yeshua and I hiked to Tyre and boarded a Greek merchant ship, yielding the preaching of his gospel to an army of beloved dupes.

ii. Cephas, the brothers Boanerges, the man once named Saul, and many others carried our false good tidings (believing them implicitly) to the Gentiles, to every major city on the jagged northern shore of the Middle Sea. Soon, colonies of Christ followers pocked the coastlands, suffering the scorn of pagan neighbours but infecting many others with belief. Yeshua, whom some of these evangelists would have recognized even in disguise, avoided his old comrades.

We settled in a small village on Skorpiós. I made and sold rare medicines. Yeshua carpentered or fished. He nearly undid us, though, by urging baptism on amazed pagans and casting his cryptic parables before them like pearls.

And then a fishing accident left Yeshua unable to move any body part but his eyes. If God had chosen Yeshua (as Yeshua had always said, even during our Passover ruse), why had this paralyzing injury befallen him? I could not believe that God would so cruelly humble his anointed son, but my affection for Yeshua led me to serve him as physician and slave. I fed and cleaned him, turned him to keep him from growing pallet sores. Beyond assisting in his lie, though, what had I done to render myself this imposter's keeper?

Observing me at work, an islander asked me why I did not abandon Yeshua and return to Palestine. I recalled Yeshua's admonitions to visit the sick, to go to the prisoner, and I stayed. The plealess dignity of his gaze also spoke to me. Heal yourself, I silently begged him. Meanwhile, my ministry to him stretched into years. Often I prayed that he would die. His eyes, though, kept me from denying him food, or the solacing rubdown, or the occasional clumsy story.

Travellers to our village sometimes told me of the spread throughout Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy of a

queer Judean sect trumpeting a saviour who had died but who now lived again as an emblem of eternal hope. I said nothing in contradiction, even though the saviour himself, eating and eliminating, mocked this hope every time I rubbed ointment on his sores or added fresh ticking to his pallet. My faith in the man had died long ago, even before the accident at sea.

Frequently, of course, I cursed myself for a fool.

Yeshua withers before me, I bitterly mused, and the dead do not rise.

iii. This morning, in his seventy-third or -fourth year, long after most other chronic invalids would have passed on, Yeshua in fact died. I have leisure to write. The dead do not rise. Even worse, God does not preside.

Yeshua's corpse, its aroma unbearably high, sits propped against the parapet in mute witness to God's silence. I should bury the man, but the act has no urgency for me, even in this heat. Does it matter that our lives have no follow-on, that we sleep rather than soar? Tonight, as Yeshua's corruption rises, mere oblivion seems a gift.

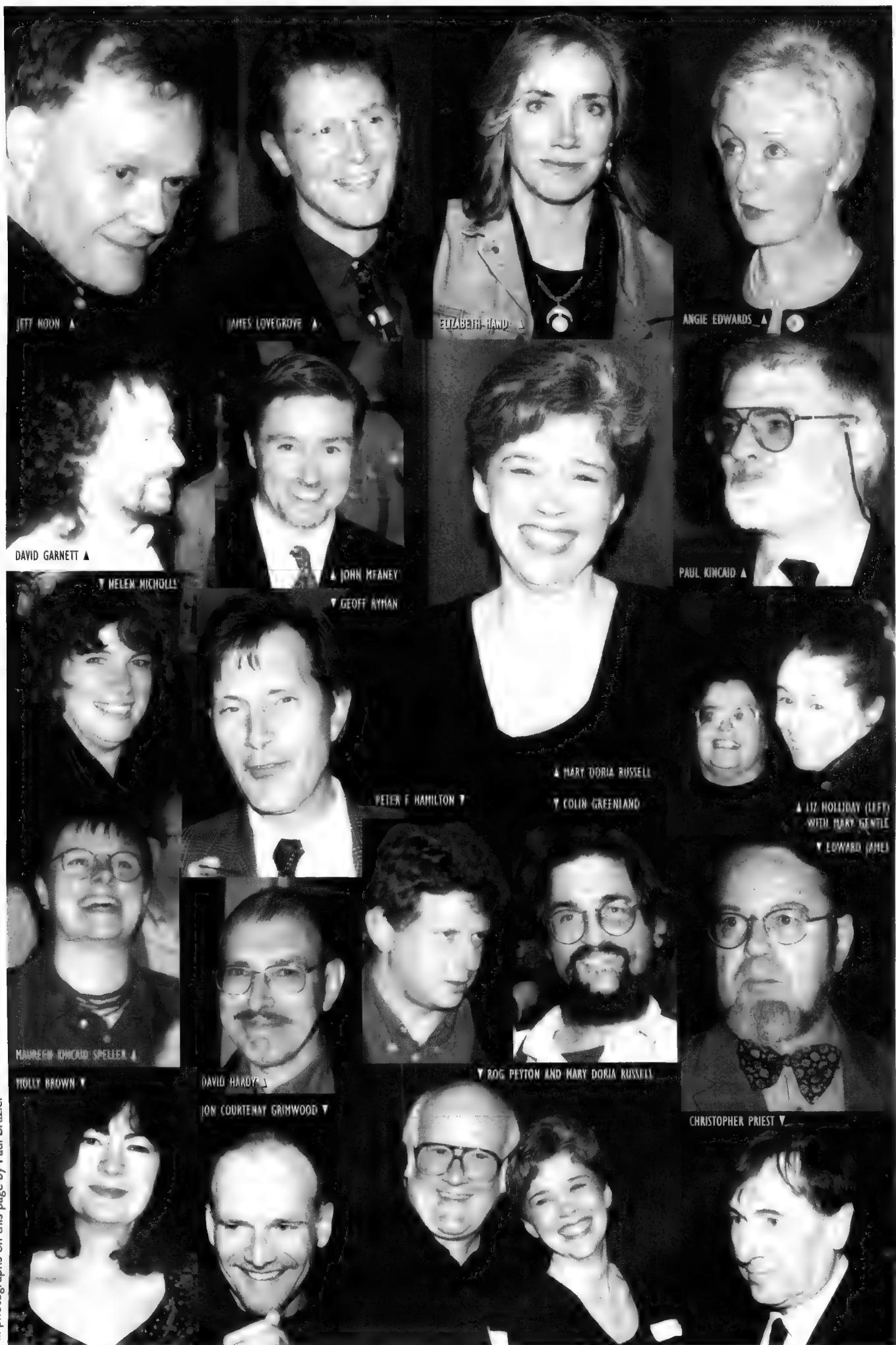
iv. God forgive me, I burned him on the beach. I made an oven of stones and torched his tenantless body. The smoke climbed both sweet and foul into the evening sky. His skull failed to burn. More disturbing to me, so did his heart.

If only in the here and now we have hope in Yeshua, we who loved him constitute the most pitiable people on earth -- as I, a slave in bondage to a lie partly of my own devising, have known for years. And now

coda Yeshua has appeared to me. Without even opening a door, he stood before the table in my hovel cupping his unburnt heart in his hands. He laid the heart on my table. He looked like an old man, but an old man in perfect health with a strange bronze nimbus about his face and arms. He said to me, after years of invalid muteness, "Congratulations, Lebbeus," and vanished as startlingly as he had come.

I do not know what this means. But Yeshua's heart still rests on my table, and I did not visit the beach to fetch it here. (Nor have I gone mad, like those from whom Yeshua once evicted demons.) Meanwhile, his heart smells sweet, less like braised flesh than new roses, and what I begin to know is that I must open my own to its fragrance.

Michael Bishop is a distinguished American sf and fantasy writer who last appeared in *Interzone* many years ago with "The Bob Dylan Tambourine Software & Satori Support Services Consortium Ltd" (issue 12) – which subsequently was chosen by Ursula Le Guin and Brian Attebery for their prestigious (but controversial) anthology *The Norton Book of Science Fiction* (1993). It's good to welcome him back to these pages.

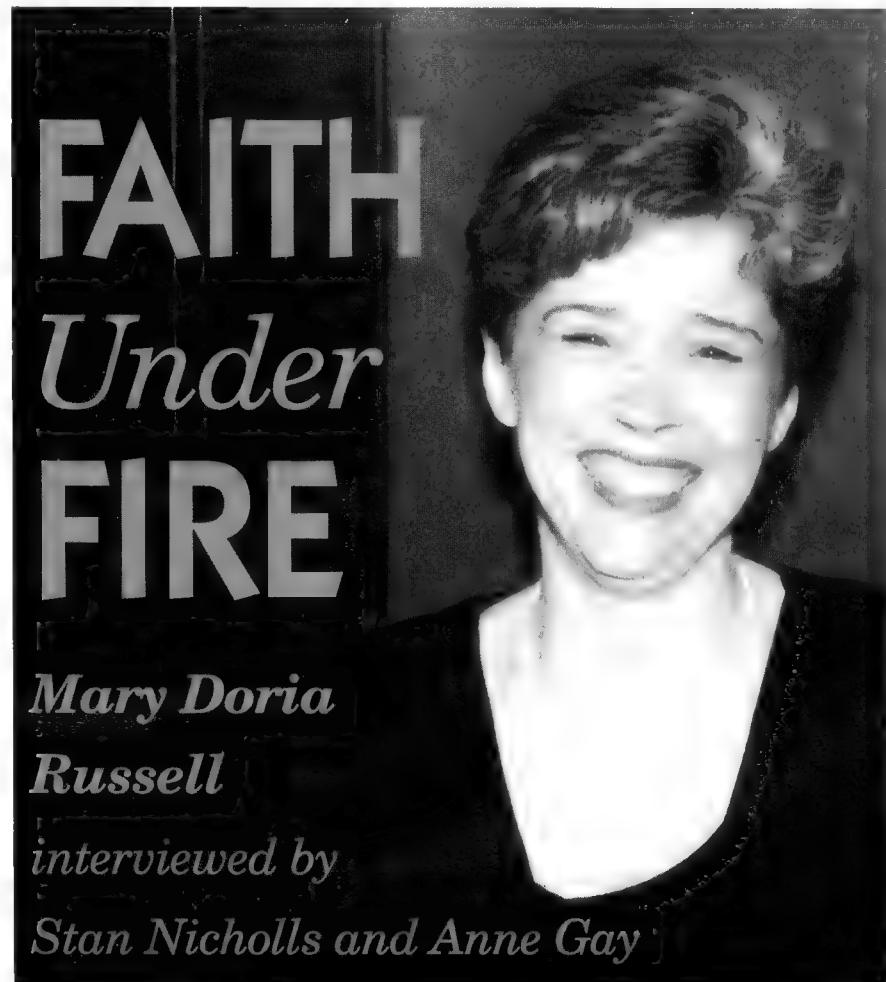


"How would I characterize my thoughts about *The Sparrow* while writing it?" Mary Doria Russell laughs. "That it was the kiss of death, of course. Absolutely. I mean, not only is it science fiction, it's religious science fiction. Religious books don't have much of a market, and science fiction is a very narrow but passionate market. You put those two together and you've just about cut out everybody. So I was pouring my soul into a book I thought had no possibility of ever being published anywhere."

The Sparrow, a novel of first contact told from the perspective of a troubled Jesuit priest, was her fiction debut "...apart from applications to grant authorities." A biological anthropologist by profession, "down-sized" at the end of the Bush era, Russell saw redundancy as an opportunity to realize her long-standing ambition to be an author. It proved no easy option. *The Sparrow* went through 60 drafts and was cut from 260,000 words to less than half that length. "Writing it was the hardest thing I've ever done," she says. "Harder than bringing up a child, harder than doing my PhD, harder than staying married to the same man for 27 years." Self-evidently a woman of boundless energy, the process obsessed her. She wrote until exhaustion, often actual pain, forced her to stop and limit herself to seven-hour days.

When she was finished, 31 agents turned her down. But tenacity paid off and eventually the book found a publisher. On the strength of little more than word of mouth, and a handful of good reviews, it became a bestseller. A film version is underway. The novel's sequel, *Children of God*, has been equally successful. Embraced by a science-fiction readership, although not explicitly published in that category, *The Sparrow* began mopping up genre honours. The only ostensible "mainstream" title on the shortlist, it won this year's Arthur C. Clarke Award, presented on 27th May.

Did her decision to choose science fiction as a vehicle stem from an enthusiasm for the form? "Yes and no. My genre of choice for a long, long time was science fiction. The novels I can name to you that I still remember and that filled a place in my heart are all science fiction. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* was the first gift my husband-to-be gave me when we were 14 and 15 years old, in 1964. *The Left Hand of Darkness* is still a brilliant book 25



FAITH Under FIRE

Mary Doria
Russell
interviewed by
Stan Nicholls and Anne Gay

years on. What else? *Stand on Zanzibar*... *Neuromancer*... I loved that. I really admired the consistency of vision. It wasn't an easy read but I enjoyed figuring it out as I went. So, yeah, I like science fiction a lot. But really, if I had thought that I could come up with any other way, any better way to tell this story, I would have. I was up against the prejudice towards science fiction among literary agents. They often said, "No science fiction, no poetry, no children's books." It's not that they think science fiction is a bad thing, it's just that they get 15 percent. Fifteen percent of very little is not worth bothering with. In the States, the ordinary advance for a first novel, a science-fiction novel, if you're very lucky, if you can get a publisher at all, is maybe \$4,000. It's like real estate. The money is at the high end of the market, so these guys weren't interested. But there was simply no other way to tell the story."

Her acceptance speech at the Clarke Award ceremony made reference to the fact that she saw no reason why religion and science should be considered mutually exclusive. Asked to expand on that, she explains, "For me, religion is not the opposite of science, it's just different. I see religion as very much like music. There's good physiology behind my feeling that we should not have to choose between music and religion and science. It's perfectly possible to include

all of those things in one coherent life. The fact is that you can have a stroke that destroys your ability to either produce or understand spoken language, but you will retain your ability to pray and to sing, because we keep those things on different sides of our brain. I think that's just phenomenal. This view that religion and science aren't in conflict or mutually exclusive is a feeling that works very well within Judaism. I can't say that there are as many ways for it to work within Christianity, actually. For example, in the Book of Deuteronomy there is the phrase 'You have seen with your own eyes what the Lord your God has wrought.' To me, to all reform Jews, that is permission to see what the world truly is and to accept that reality. You don't have to deny reality, you don't have to get into 'Well, 6,000 years ago God created the world and that's why there can't be dinosaurs.' You just don't get yourself into those kinds of problems. You're allowed to look at creation myths and to know that they're a poetic metaphor for how things began, and that's okay."

Do we understand her to say that she's a reform Jew? "Yeah." Not a Catholic? "No, no." She writes with such authority and a depth of sensibility about Catholicism that naturally we assumed... "Everybody does!" The already familiar, infectious laugh comes into play again. "They're characters! I'm a writer! I made it up! Let

Facing page: The Arthur C. Clarke Award ceremony was held in the Science Museum in London on 27th May 1998. Nominees were Stephen Baxter, Elizabeth Hand, James Lovegrove, Jeff Noon, Mary Doria Russell and Sheri Tepper. Winner was Mary Doria Russell with *The Sparrow*.

me explain. I was brought up very sketchily as a Catholic, back in the 1950s. I was at Sacred Heart school for four years, and the only reason I was there was that my brother had been handicapped with 30-percent hearing loss which was not discovered until he was out of first grade. They thought he was retarded, then they discovered that he simply couldn't hear what the teacher was saying. The public school refused to let him repeat the year. In the Catholic school the nuns were willing to start him over and let him learn what he should have learned in that first year. I just came along as an afterthought."

She left the Church at 15 and cast off belief. "I was a flat-out, uncompromising atheist for 20 years, and it wasn't until I became a mother that I realized I wanted to raise my child with some sort of moral and ethical framework. I just could not go back to Christianity in any of its forms, but at the same time I realized that my ethics and morality, what I wanted to pass on to my child, were rooted in religion. So I just followed the roots a little deeper, and I found that I'd lost a lot of the impulse that made me want to argue every time I set foot inside a church or heard any sort of religious service. It took about eight years of study and movement towards this, and *The Sparrow* was part of the process of deciding to bring religion back into my life and into the lives of my family. My husband is not Jewish, I should point out. He's an ex-Catholic and an atheist, and he's perfectly okay about this. Danny, our son, is Jewish, and would very much like for Daddy to make a conversion so we could all be one family, and he brings this up every time we go to a Chinese restaurant. Don [her husband] can't get pork at home because I keep a kosher kitchen and Danny explains to the Chinese waitress every time, 'My father eats pork. He's not Jewish.' Like she cares! Or even understands what he's saying."

So she's not orthodox but keeps kosher? "Yes. I haven't eaten pork for a long time, but the whole thing about shellfish must have been a typo. God couldn't have been completely serious about lobster. You know, transcription problems." Maybe it was just because Jerusalem's inland and by the time shellfish got there it must have been pretty rank. "Yes, exactly. But I found about a year and a half ago that I could not go on being inconsistent about that, so I stopped eating shellfish. This is what reformed Judaism is about. As you add observance that feels authentic to you, you find what the point of it was. You're not supposed to find out ahead of time. You're not supposed to find that it was a healthful thing to do, that you could have got sick from the shellfish. You're not supposed to understand it that way. Because I keep kosher I'm now forced

...I'd lost
a lot of the
impulse that
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want to argue
every time I
set foot inside
a church...

every time I eat to deal with being Jewish. When I'm in a hotel room all by myself, and no one would know if I got the shrimp, I still cannot eat it. I just find myself unable to do that. This is all still in subjunctive mood for me. You know, 'What if it were?' But because Judaism is such a practical religion it doesn't matter what happens later. It's satisfying on a daily basis, in a way that makes my life richer, and I accept it on that level. There doesn't have to be any cosmic payoff."

We wonder if she regards all religions as equally valid. She follows a reflective pause with, "I'll tell you the way I feel, and this goes back to my training as an anthropologist. There is religion in every human culture. Not in every human being, not in every individual, but every single human culture we know of has had some reach for the divine. That is as human as opposable thumbs, the lack of a tail and bipedalism. One of the points I make in *Children of God* is that because we are biologically driven from birth to hear noise and make language out of it, we are also driven to stare at chaos long enough to find a pattern. There is a drive to want to understand, and this carries over into the big picture, so to speak. What is life about? Why are we here? So I think all religions are valid because they are all coming from that human need to reach for meaning. On the other hand I do feel that you should get a paid professional in to do your theology. I don't think it's something you should do at home as an amateur, and I point out that Heaven's Gate [the cult] is what happens when you try this, when you put together an unholy mix of revelation and *Star Trek* and goodness knows what else. They

had tapes of people who were among those who committed suicide at Heaven's Gate. There was one woman, mid-30s, not a kid, who talked about why she was a part of this. As I listened to her I thought you could simply change the heading on this piece of news, run the entire tape without changing a word and if you had told me that this was a Roman Catholic nun I would have believed you, and found nothing in what she said in any way disturbing or out of place. So I am not a complete relativist. Though I think Catholicism is probably a better way. It's been thought out for 2,000 years. Anything that's been available only in the last 15 weeks is probably not a good bet. This is an area where tradition has its place. The reason that tradition works is that it has, over many generations and many different cultures, helped people live their lives in ways that are beautiful. It's also been the root of horrific violence of a very debauched sort."

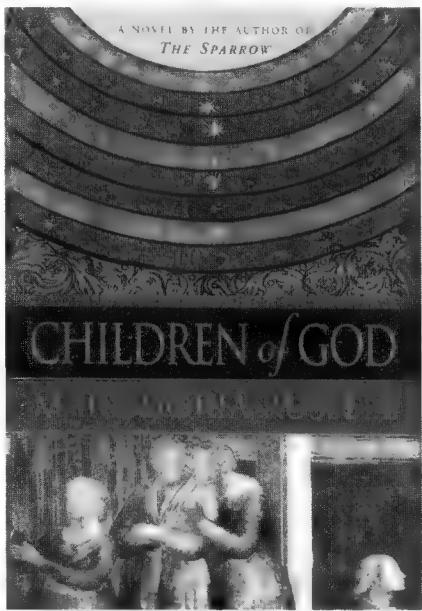
Agreed. Which is why we were a little surprised that in *The Sparrow* she depicts Jesuits only as a force for good. "They had good centuries and bad centuries. They were craven between about 1830 and 1935. That was a bad century." What about some of the things they were doing in South America, when they were saying, "These people are obviously not human"? "No, no, that was never the Jesuits. It was the Franciscans. It makes a difference. As an anthropologist I used some of the ethnographies the Jesuits wrote. They were the best that their culture had to offer at the time. This was the turning of the 1600s. It was a violent, nasty culture sending those guys out, and they were not bad under those circumstances. Everybody is a product of their time and of their environment, and they honestly believed that to bring those Indians to Christ was to save their immortal souls from eternal estrangement from God. If those are the stakes, how can you withhold your information? If you believe you are privy to information that will make a difference for ever, for ever, how could you keep it secret? I understand where they were coming from. Jesuits today do not proselytize. They go out and they do what they do and if anyone is interested and comes to them and says, 'Why do you do this?' they're very happy to share their motives. But they do not actively proselytize, partially because they know the damage that could be caused."

The trouble is, we've all seen *The Mission*. "Yeah, and it wasn't so bad. It had a Jesuit advisor, and it's not a bad indication of how things were. My point is that for the 1600s they did okay. Part of what I was doing with *The Sparrow* was to say, 'Look, even after 500 years of hindsight, with all the good will in the world, with the desire not to proselytize and

to do it right, even so you are going to make dreadful mistakes.' There's no way to do this perfectly the first time. The dearest of friends, the closest of spouses, misunderstand each other on a daily basis, don't they? And we speak the same language, we share a species. Except for in certain parts of West Virginia. So just imagine how much more difficult it would be if you were from the 16th century. The whole concept of cultural relativity only exists, anthropology only exists, because of the aftermath of this blind, stumbling amateurism as applied to the problems of first contact."

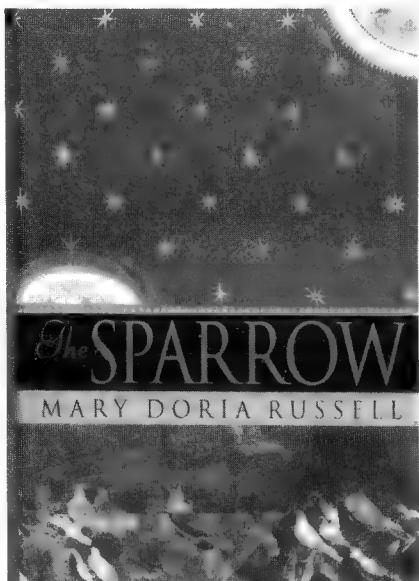
Which brings us back to using science fiction as the conduit for the ideas in *The Sparrow*. "Absolutely. If I had dropped back even a generation and put my missionaries and my explorers into Papua New Guinea, it would still be not dealing with late-20th-century sensibilities where diversity is something to be embraced, right? So it would still distance the reader from being dumped into a position of radical ignorance and having to cope with it. What I want to do is make people understand that what Columbus did wasn't so bad at first. Okay, things went bad very fast, but it didn't start out that way. I wanted them to feel that this crew of human beings was the best shot going. Like, if I had to be represented by eight individuals in this situation, I would trust these people [the principal characters in *The Sparrow*] to do a pretty good job. I wanted you to identify with them. I wanted them to seem a little smarter, a little more broadly experienced than you were, so that you'd think, 'Oh boy, I wouldn't have thought of that! They did that good.' I wanted you to be sucked into the confidence that they were going to get it right. Then the tragedy of these completely unintentional mistakes hits harder. That has to be done as first-contact science fiction. There simply isn't any place on the planet where you can do that any longer."

So is this the beginning of a *science-fiction* writing career, or a writing career? "It looks like a writing career. What is of interest in these books for me, the theme that goes through my work, is faith under fire. Faith is not a logical place for me to be, it is not a comfortable place for me to be. What engages my passions are people of faith put into extreme situations and either having to jettison their beliefs or act on them. The book I'm writing, my third book, is set in Genoa during the Nazi Occupation. It's about the Jewish underground and the Italian Resistance north of Genoa. This is after the Italians made a separate peace on September 18th, 1943. They looked up and realized it wasn't the end of the war. They had 100,000 Nazi troops on the peninsula and they were now an occupied country. Everything



changed. The Nazis were shooting Italian soldiers who had been demobilized, but they were shooting them as deserters. People did not know about Auschwitz, but as the round-ups began word began to filter back of what was going on when those trains reached Poland. So you knew that if you stayed out of it, if you simply tried to walk away, the trains were rolling and your neighbours were dying. If you resisted you knew very quickly that the Germans were rounding up ten Italians and hanging them for every German who was either killed or wounded. No matter what you did the price was being paid in blood. There was no way to get out of the game. All your decisions had these enormous consequences and you had to make up your mind like that." She snaps her fingers. "I find that makes a wonderful story. This is all going to be based on historical reality and there are tremendous stories of resistance and rescue."

Why pick Genoa, specifically, as a



setting? "Genoa? Well, *Doria*. Andrea Doria, an Italian, ruled Genoa in the 1600s. Now you have to understand that by the time the name got down to my family we were living in the toe of the boot, not in Genoa, and we had descended to the point of armed robbery. My grandfather did time for that. So the ancestral glories of this family had become very attenuated by the time they got to my generation. My grandfather always used to brag, 'We are descended from Andrea Doria, and we are noblemen forever.' And my father would lean over and say, 'If you have to go back 400 years to find someone to be proud of you should just shut up about it.' I am a Jew by choice, I'm an Italian by heritage, and I found out that the Italian Jews had an 80-percent survival rate. That's the highest of any occupied country and the opposite percentage of what you find everywhere else. For 55 years we've looked at what went wrong in the rest of Europe. But what went right in Italy? Italy was a Fascist country, and yet..."

It all ties in, she contends, with what she was saying about raising children. "How do you raise them with a sense of honour? How do you raise them knowing that there are some things you do not do no matter what the temptation, and there are other things that you never do no matter how much pressure you're under? How do you raise children to want to be good? The way the Germans raised their children had a great deal to do with kids who did not question authority, who were bullied and beaten into being obedient, and expected the same of everyone else. It's a heck of a toxic way to bring up children. How we raise children is an absolutely critical piece of human culture. I'm not saying we can explain all anti-Semitism, Nazism and World War II on the basis of this. But I think it's an element. The other element in Italy is that they have not been well governed since Hadrian. So an edict from Rome is of very little interest, and the whole attitude towards government is that it's something to be circumvented, ignored or exploited if necessary or convenient."

Let's not forget the pragmatism, or hypocrisy, of those popes who had secret wives and mistresses. "Right. One of the very few passages I now regret cutting from *The Sparrow* came in that little reverie Emilio has about celibacy. It had to do with the fact that originally celibacy was imposed simply to clear up matters of inheritance for baron bishops. It wasn't until 1100 that they came up with this." What about St Paul and his contention that it was better to marry than to burn? "Well, that was his opinion. This was a man who left his wife at 40 and went off to live with a guy. I'm sorry, but I wonder about that. It was 1100 when they finally imposed the notion of a celibate priesthood so that the

children could not inherit Church property. It was keeping the books straight! It was probably looking back to Paul and using that as well. But monks tend to live in communities alone, and if you have people trying to live in a community, a religious community, you don't need sexual tension, jealousies, all of those kinds of things. And these things are a kind of natural outcome of living with the opposite sex. So they eliminated it. I'm trying to reconstruct the logic that brings you from normal biology to an institution that holds celibacy as a central requirement. It's all over the place. Buddhist monks and nuns are also celibate for the same reasons. It's very difficult to live in a community and still have family."

But Jews can marry, and the Church of England has married priests. "Yes, and during the Renaissance you got to a point where they had wives and illegitimate families. It got to where the egregiousness of the flouting of the ideal was so bad that Lucrezia Borgia, at the age of 17, was unable to say with certainty who was the father of her child, her brother the bishop or her father. That is a triangle which is so abusive and so spectacularly hypocritical. In 1960 the Jesuits wrote a position paper for John XXII that said diocesan priests who deal on a daily basis with parishioners that have families should be permitted to marry, and that the old orders, like the Franciscans and the Jesuits, would retain the vow of celibacy as a charism, a special kind of grace. You would know going in you were expected to do one or the other. You couldn't just want to be a Jesuit and be celibate until you found the right girl. You had to choose up front how you were going to handle it. If John XXII had not died this would have happened. He had accepted the papers. Paul VI decided not to do it. There were all kinds of interesting politics in that. It was very weird."

We usher the conversation back into the anorak department for a moment and ask if it's possible that she'd return to science fiction if it was appropriate to any future idea. "I'm hoping you will go where I take you. I have so many wonderful awards from the science-fiction community and I've been made so welcome that it's great. But what I'm going to be saying is, 'Come with me. See what I'm interested in next.' If the best way to tell a story is to do it in science-fiction terms, sure, I'd come back in a minute. It's an entirely pragmatic decision for me. But it might interest you to know that the fourth book I have in my head may well end up being a serial-murder mystery set in Pharaonic Egypt." Could she elaborate? "Sure. It began by my being astounded to find out that the three names I knew from that era were all associated. One was Akhenaton, who

*'Come with me.
See what
I'm interested
in next.'*

introduced monotheism, thereby putting many priests, men of the gods, into a serious professional dilemma. Faith under fire again, right? And in that case I'm going to be on the side of the polytheists, to whom monotheism is a terrible, dangerous heresy. Akhenaton was married to Nefertiti. I had no idea! His son was Tutankhamen. Both Nefertiti and Akhenaton, and Tutankhamen and his young wife, were love matches. Both those couples were profoundly devoted and that is absolutely unknown. They're the only ones depicted in Egyptian art with their children on their laps and their hands touching. They were always holding hands, they were always very close to one another. Their pictures are very naturalistic depictions of normal everyday life. The four of them disappeared one by one in about 18 months. I think I know who did them in. And murder mystery's the way to go with that. I haven't really started the research. I just had this notion in the back of my mind that it was kind of cool."

The received wisdom is that it's bad for a writer's career to grasshop genres. Have her publishers mentioned that? "No. In fact, when I was last with my major editor, my *über*-editor, as we must say now that Bertelsmann has bought Random House, my *über*-editor asked me what I was working on. I said, 'I've had in mind a book about the Jewish underground in Genoa under the Nazi occupation,' and I told her something about the characters, and what I had in mind for them. Her reaction was to sit quietly for a little bit, then lean back and say, 'I'm so glad you're not going to turn out to be a science-fiction writer.'"

This third book sounds as though its exploration of the downside of human

nature isn't exactly going to make it a barrel of laughs. *The Sparrow* also has its darknesses. Yet the nobility of the human spirit is already evident as a perennial theme in Russell's work. Does she see herself as an essentially optimistic writer? "I would say I'm the world's most cheerful pessimist." The captivating laugh is back. "I always expect the worst, so life is constantly surprising me by how well it turns out. That's a much better way to live than to always be expecting the best and being disappointed by everything. There are no headaches, there is only brain-cancer, and when it turns out to be a headache I go, 'Oh! Isn't that wonderful!'"

Let's put it another way. Does she believe in the fundamental goodness of people? "No. There's a Jewish take on this that says we are each born with an impulse towards good and an impulse towards evil. The Jews are commanded to work for a world in which it is easier for people to choose to be good. It doesn't mean that you can perfect the world, it doesn't mean that we'll achieve any kind of Nirvana, but you have to work towards justice and a passion for truth. I try to make it easy for my son to choose to be good. I don't threaten him with Hell, I don't drive him with Heaven, but I try to make it a life in which it feels right for him to be good. I can't follow him around. He has to be out there making his own choices, and part of that is giving him the opportunity to make decisions that are safe, and that I am willing to let him abide by. All this takes a lot of thought, but the kinds of decisions I let him make are not dangerous. I am not abandoning my responsibility. I think of myself as the architect of his childhood within this environment that I construct for him. I would like to end up with the kind of person who never hesitates to do a kind or honourable thing. He's only 12, he's only half-done, but there are moments when I think, 'Okay! I think this has a chance of working!' Children are not naturally good; they're selfish and self-centred, they're going to lie if they think they can get away with it."

Ah, yes. That Ray Bradbury notion that children are essentially an alien race. Small assassins. "Yes! I've often said that my son makes me believe in the existence of intelligent aliens. Kids! They're apart from us. Their processes are really not like ours. There are parts of their brains that are not marinated yet, connections that haven't been made. But he's only been on the planet for 12 years. Cut the kid some slack, it's a big place to figure out." She treats us to that laugh and adopts a spooky voice. "They live among us. The truth is out there!"

Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* is published by Black Swan at £6.99. *Children of God* will be published in the UK next Spring.

Do others get unreasonably irritated when writers "steal" previously existing titles? David Zindell's *War in Heaven* (1998) is a jolly good read, but *War in Heaven* (1930) by Charles Williams still has many fans. This applies even more forcibly to *Greenmantle* by Charles de Lint (1988) and John Buchan (1916). Or *The Lost World* by....

HEAPS OF QUAP

Jerome Bixby (1923-1998), best remembered for his 1953 sf/horror short "It's a Good Life," died on 28 April from complications after a quadruple heart bypass. Other work included the original *Fantastic Voyage* script and several *Star Trek* episodes

Lee Elias (1920-1998), the US comics artist who illustrated the 1951-3 *Beyond Mars* newspaper strip – scripted by Jack Williamson from his own novels *Seetee Ship* and *Seetee Shock* – died in April.

David Farland, who collected some praise for his 1998 debut fantasy *The Runelords: The Sum of All Men*, is now said to be a pseudonym of the established sf author Dave Wolverton.

Peter Hamilton was fascinated by a fervent Usenet discussion (based on *The Reality Dysfunction*) of whether he was gay or bisexual: "Beats getting mentioned by Thog any day." Major collateral damage was sustained by Ken MacLeod, who upon reading these speculations snorted coffee all over his computer keyboard.

Diana Wynne Jones sends a picture of chaps apparently mud-wrestling in their underpants, and with evil glee draws my attention to the caption: "The Langford Ha-Ha Game, a muddy version of five-a-side rugby played in the ha-ha. It was discontinued about ten years ago." And no wonder.

Lazarus Long emerged from Heinlein's pages to get an extensive write-up in the *Independent on Sunday*, 31 May. "Prince" Lazarus (formerly US entrepreneur Howard Turney) plans to live forever and is building a New Utopia on platforms supported by concrete stilts above a sunken Caribbean reef. His dream is of a tax haven for capitalists oppressed by welfare states: one looks forward to Heinleinian scenes in which whining freeloaders who can't afford the oxygen charges will be, if not cycled through the airlock, at least permitted to walk the plank.

Andy Sawyer of the SF Foundation jubilates some more: "Liverpool University has decided to definitely go ahead and buy the Wyndham Archive, after a short period of flabbergast at exactly how much money the upgrading of environmental conditions to meet the terms of the Heritage Lottery Fund grant would cost. They have taken the eminently rea-

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

sonable tack that we're going to have to address this problem sooner or later. We still need money! (Don't we all....) Donations welcome. Anyone with money to spare to support what really is one of the most significant moves in British sf, please contact me." (c/o Special Collections, Sydney Jones Library, U of Liverpool, PO Box 123, Liverpool, L69 3DA.)

Brian Stableford must cherish fond memories of his guest-of-honour appearances at Imperial College SF Society's small annual London convention: his forthcoming novel *Inherit the Earth* features an all-powerful and slightly unscrupulous biotechnology outfit called PicoCon.

J. Michael Straczynski of *Babylon 5* issued an Internet mini-fatwa against the British "Wolf 359" media conventions. His complaint was that when Warner Bros donated their London theatre for a free B5 screening as a "gift" to the fans, their legal department later discovered that the Wolf pack were charging £20 per head admission.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Arthur C. Clarke Award. The £1,000 cheque went to the popular favourite, Mary Doria Russell for *The Sparrow*. We await the usual protests from publishers bewailing this award's presentation to a book without a spaceship on the cover.

Publishers & Sinners. SFX's sister magazine *Cult TV* has folded, despite what has been described as acting editor Steve Jarratt's efforts to woo the *Loaded* audience with "retrototty." This took such forms as a nude centrefold of erstwhile *Dr Who* starlet Katy Manning, her modesty very nearly protected by an amorous Dalek's sink plunger.

SF & Fantasy Hall of Fame. This virtual edifice appears to be in Kansas: July 1998 "inductees" were Hal Clement, Frederik Pohl, Robert

Heinlein and C. L. Moore. Not all of them attended the ceremony.

Prediction Corner. "Before man reaches the moon, your mail will be delivered within hours from New York to California, from England to India, by guided missile. We stand on the threshold of rocket mail." (Arthur Summerfield, US Postmaster General, 23 June 1959)

Bibliomania. Several people asked how to recognize the presumably rare defective copies of the Discworld map *A Tourist Guide to Lancre*. Terry Pratchett reveals: "One might end up believing that after the 'key' numbers were overlaid on the map, in accordance with Paul's artwork, a gust of wind randomly shuffled them – and no one noticed."

Mythopoeic Awards: 1998 shortlist. Adult Literature: Peter S. Beagle, *Giant Bones*; A. S. Byatt, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*; Charles de Lint, *Trader*; Neil Gaiman, *Neverwhere*; Patrick O'Leary, *The Gift*. Children's: Susan Cooper, *The Boggart and the Monster*; Dahlov Ipcar, *A Dark Horn Blowing*; Robin McKinley, *Rose Daughter*; Jane Yolen, *Young Merlin* trilogy (*Passager*, *Hobby*, *Merlin*). Scholarship (Inklings): Verlyn Flieger, *A Question of Time: J. R. R. Tolkien's Road to Faerie*; Janine Goffar, *C. S. Lewis Index: Rumours from the Sculptor's Shop*; Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Companion & Guide*; Brian Horne (ed) *Charles Williams: A Celebration*; Kathryn Lindskoog, *Finding the Landlord: A Guidebook to C. S. Lewis's The Pilgrim's Regress*. Scholarship (General): Glen Cavaliero, *The Supernatural and English Fiction*; John Clute & John Grant (ed) *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*; S. T. Joshi, *Lord Dunsany, Master of the Anglo-Irish Imagination*; Richard Mathews, *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*.

Thog's Masterclass. "He sighed to himself and cursed the necessity of having a social worker in his midst." (John Saul, *Suffer the Children*, 1977) ... *Dept of Something in the Wind*: "... Henkie, rather than giving the fellow a proper funeral, had followed Briello's instructions and had his friend stuffed. He'd kept the body propped up in a corner of his studio until the authorities got wind of its existence." (Charles De Lint, *The Little Country*, 1991) ... "He had seen few women in his life, and none at all like this one. The heart sprang out of him ..." (Robin Wayne Bailey, *Shadowdance*, 1996) ... "Her nipples stood erect, like twin blades ..." (Graham Joyce, *The Tooth Fairy*, 1996) ... "Saturday morning Jennifer awoke early, the sun prodding her eyelids like an animated alarm clock." (Joan Lowery Nixon, *The Stalker*, 1985) ... *Dept of Mary Doria Russell Critiques*: "The shadow froze and a noise like a disembowelled sparrow chirped above him." (N. Lee Wood, *Faraday's Orphans*, 1996)

Who have no eyes

Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

I was eight years old when it began. Oh, well, I'm sure it actually began before birth; some gene or chromosome out of place – probably the same one responsible for knock-knees and overbites. But when I was eight, I noticed the symptoms.

I didn't know they were symptoms. I didn't even know the problem was mine. I thought my third-grade teacher's handwriting was illegible, and that, because of that, I should have to sit in the front row with the "troublemakers." She accused me (me!) of goofing off and told my parents I had a behaviour problem. Stubborn, she said.

"She says she can't read the blackboard, Mrs Harbau." Mrs Phillips was a solid, lavender-and-blue-flowed wall of disapproval. Her antique bows-and-roses brooch was as high as my eyes would reach. I couldn't bear to look at her face.

Mom glanced at the blackboard. "Well, your handwriting is a little light..."

"Mary sits in the front row, Mrs Harbau. Right where she's sitting now. None of the other children have trouble reading my handwriting – even those in the last row."

I pondered the vague, yellow flourishes. (None of the other children...) I made out the letter "W." She made wonderful "W's."

"Read the first question, Mary," ordered Mrs Phillips.

I blinked and concentrated on that "W." What might be expected to follow it? I tried to make letters out of the ephemeral curves, but could not. Just lines crossing, weaving, spiralling. I squinted. That was a little better.

"What," I read. "What is..." I stopped. "I can't. It's all... garbly."

"You see," said Mrs Phillips.

"It's her eyes," said my mother.

I was exonerated, but now I knew that none of the other children saw the world as I did – as an indistinct

blur of light and colour and movement. They not only knew that trees had individual leaves, they actually *saw* them. They recognized friends before they spoke, or spotted them across the playground without having to remember what colour they were wearing that day. And they read Mrs Phillips's handwriting and road signs and library-shelf notation.

I was different. I was inferior. God had given me imperfect eyes to go with my imperfect teeth and legs and a body that mocked my desire to be diminutive and normal.

A doctor examined me and talked about myopia and astigmatism. He put thick, heavy lenses in a pair of my mother's old reading glasses (which says something about her acknowledgment of the permanence of my condition). No one in our family wore glasses to *see* with. Not every day. Not on the playground. Not in front of their friends.

Less than a year later the lenses were strengthened. Again, my mother supplied the frames – fancy metal ones with diamanté sprinkled across the top. After a year in the horn-rims, I was excited to have them, almost relieved my sight had deteriorated further. Mercifully, I don't remember what I looked like in them – the only photographs of me in glasses are candid shots, in which my face blurs as I whirled away from the camera.

By age ten, I was in my third pair of glasses; the lenses thickening with every new prescription. I knew what lay waiting for me, then; what was hiding in the years ahead like a slinking predator in thick weeds. I began to practice for it the way I imagined those lithe girl gymnasts with their faultless smiles and straight legs practised the balance beam or the uneven parallels. Those fortunates performed endless mounts and dismounts and I went about our house turning out the lights to practice for blindness.

I was very good at it. After several years of rehearsal,

my hands could find and identify anything in the pitch blackness of any room. I could make a sandwich with my eyes closed, pour myself a drink, even cook soup – all with a combination of touch, hearing and smell. My feet could carry me unerringly up and down the darkened basement stairs. There was nothing I couldn't do with my eyes closed. Nothing except read.

I had no access to braille publications and no intention of burdening my poor parents by asking to learn to read with my fingertips. Already Mom had caught me navigating the basement with my eyes screwed tightly shut.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Practising to be blind," I said with a child's candour.

She told me I was being morbid and made me come upstairs and play cards with her. Braille was out of the question.

I was sick with fear. Reading was the World's Greatest Pleasure. There was nothing that compared with reading, not even frog hunting or horseback riding. The horror of going without books loomed closer with each visit to the eye doctor. I determined to read everything I could before darkness completely engulfed me.

"You'll ruin your eyes," Mother said whenever she caught me reading by flashlight after curfew.

It was too late. They were already the victims of planned obsolescence. It's true, incidentally, that boys don't make passes at girls who wear glasses (or Oxfords or retainers) unless they happen, themselves, to be the victims of the same genetic malfunction.

That was all right. Boy-lessness left me more time for reading and conferring with a friend who was several steps closer to Ultimate Darkness than I was. She could no longer distinguish colours and had to read with a book virtually perched on her nose. I learned much from her about courage and acquiescence; she learned from me how to ride a horse – a lopsided exchange.

When I was 15, my father died. A bad heart, they said. If I ever needed proof that a person's physical state did not mirror the spiritual, that was it. Beautiful men and women could be self-impressed and churlish; blind men could be insightful; and loving, tender men could die of bad hearts.

A 15-year-old is at the very threshold of understanding permanence. My father walked out of the house one morning and never came back. I took note.

I continued with my life, not smoothly, but successfully, studied Theatre Arts and became actress and over-achiever. I still rehearsed my eventual blindness – refined my movements and body language, honed senses I didn't know I had, and attempted to turn a physical deficit into an asset. If I had to be different to 95% of the people around me then, by God, that difference would become a sweeping statement of Self.

Dress rehearsal came at age 25. In one of those coincidences best described as cosmic, I won the leading role in a repertory production of *Wait Until Dark*, the ageless thriller about a blind woman's triumph over a team of drug runners.

At the reading, the company's director, David Chamberlin, asked me, "Can you pretend to be blind?"

I laughed. "I've been practising," I said, "since I was eight years old."

He thought I was joking, which only heightened his amazement at my Susy Hendrix. "Are you sure you're not blind?" he asked me.

"Not yet," I said. But soon. Though my doctor had declared my vision stabilized as I passed out of puberty, I knew it couldn't last. Blindness was inevitable.

I was buoyed and amused by David's praise of my acting ability. Would he be startled to know that I could pick his voice out of a crowd from across the Theatre's broad lobby, but could only recognize him on sight by the unique way he carried himself? Would he be shocked to discover that when I took my glasses off to go on stage, I had to count my steps to keep from falling off the flat, or worse, tumbling over the apron into the front row?

At the play's climax, when the lights went out on stage and the Exit sign was eclipsed and the cracks beneath every door stuffed with wadding so no light intruded and no member of the audience escaped, then I was in my element. I was no longer inferior to those who had eyes. We were equals in the dark. No, better still – I had the advantage. They curled inward when the lights went out, vulnerable. I blossomed. I, like Susy Hendrix, was mistress of the Dark Domain; snug in its warm, fond embrace. I could feel its fingers trail across my forehead, its dust-scented breath fan my cheeks. Lover, shield and armour – sword even, I thought, as the drug smuggler died at my feet every night.

When the lights came back up after each performance, everyone welcomed them but me. I took my bows and my roses, accepted accolades, signed autographs and felt as if a friend was missing – had slipped from the hall before curtain call and waited for me somewhere unviolated by light. But, when I got home to my dark flat, he was there; companionable and silent. I went about my late-night business and to bed, never turning on a light. He always stayed the night. And always, morning intruded and left me alone to struggle in the cold, painful daylight.

Don't misunderstand me. I was not tragic. Light simply hurt my eyes. More and more I went about without the glasses I had been ordered to wear perpetually. Each evening's performance went better than the one before and I glided smoothly between light and shadow, eschewing the light whenever possible.

"It really is painful," I told my doctor. "I'm much more comfortable in the dark now."

His face was a white, puzzled blur. "I don't understand that, Mary." He shook his head and the metal rims of his glasses shot piercing shafts of light at me. "There's no suggestion of any condition that should cause light sensitivity. Your eyes have been stable for years. I'm at a loss to understand why they're suddenly deteriorating again. Are you straining them?"

I shook my head.

"Now, Mary, I know how much you love to read. Are you sure?"

"I've started listening to audio cassettes. That way I can read in the dark." What I would have given to have had that as a child! No tell-tale flashlights beneath the sheets, just a cassette deck and headphones. I'd never have been caught. Bedtime stories, indeed.

The doctor suggested I see a specialist and gave me a name and number. I had no intention of ever calling him. It was foolish to prolong the wait; to postpone the

inevitable. I had my cassettes, I could walk to the library and the bookstore to get more. I could take a cab or bus anywhere else, just as I'd been doing since I failed to qualify for a driver's licence. I wasn't afraid of the dark.

Wait ran for three months, after which David gathered the company and presented his new project. I was not the only one who argued that *Wait* still had a lot of life left in it, still would mesmerize and terrify our audiences. I didn't mention what it meant to me; didn't tell him that my moment of stygian triumph had become the centrepiece of every day. One doesn't put one's own interests ahead of the troupe's.

We argued and lost. We had one month left, David said, then it was on to new things. I didn't want to go on to new things. I had severe headaches that last month; wore dark glasses from morning till sunset. And there was depression, too, deep and unreasonable. David had already announced and cast his new project and I had an important supporting role. There was no reason for me to be depressed, but I was, and recalled I'd felt the same palette of emotion when a childhood friend had moved away. I never saw her again. People who walked out of my life never came back, I knew that already. I had no way to hold them.

The last night of my life as Susy Hendrix was sweet and sad. I don't say "bittersweet." Besides being a terrible cliché, it would be false. I wasn't bitter. I was resigned. I accepted this loss of vicarious power the way I accepted my impending sightlessness. There was little sense in becoming obsessed with it. Once David made up his mind about something, there was no stopping him. He didn't know how to acquiesce. I was very good at it; I'd had lots of practice.

The effusions of the Theatre were especially pungent and sharp that last evening. The air was thicker, heavier with the black velvet aroma of old teasers and the perfumes of pancake and grease paint. I flattered myself that I gave my best performance ever. I worked myself and my audience to fever pitch – bending and shaping each scene: suspense-release, suspense-release. It was a dance – a *pas de deux* – and when the lights went out, my partner tittered nervously and I smiled, knowing the uneasy laughter would end abruptly with a scream and a roar and a fury of movement (terrifying because they could only *feel* it). They, with their atrophied senses, felt trapped by the darkness, numbed, powerless, unable even to locate an escape route. I didn't want to escape.

I played the last lit scene with my eyes closed. The curtain fell and I gathered myself for the final bows. The footlights felt so pleasant and warm on my face – so benign. In a moment I would have to open my eyes and acknowledge the cruel glare.

The applause seemed especially fierce tonight – sharp and tangy like the breeze off Chesapeake Bay. I sighed and smiled and opened my eyes. Nothing changed. The applause went on, still fiercely, the lamps were still warm and benign, but no stabbing, sense-drowning light rushed at me. The darkness was complete.

I cried and laughed and drank the perfume of my evening's roses. It was sweet – sweet and vivid red, undiluted by vision's flat, muddled perception of petal and thorn. I bowed again and again, laughing, waving,

adoring the roses.

Backstage, in my dressing room, I changed into street clothes and hung my wardrobe, consigning it back to mothballs. David came in, cat-like.

"Coming to the cast party, Mare?" he asked.

"Wouldn't miss it," I said and smiled. "Who's hosting?"

"I am, of course. Closing night and all that."

I recalled his house vividly – angles, all angles and little short staircases. "Great," I said. "Give me a lift?"

"You bet, Miss Bernhardt." He came over and kissed my cheek. "You were wonderful tonight – every night – but especially tonight. Better than wonderful. It was as if –" He stopped, stared at me – I could feel his breath fanning the hair across my forehead; could smell his cologne – woody, spiced with stormswept Atlantic shorelines and wind-twisted trees.

I laughed. "What?"

"Your eyes... Are your eyes all right? They seem... I don't know... a little glassy. Are they bothering you?"

I smiled and patted his cheek, liking the soft prickle of close, curling beard. "They're not bothering me a bit, David. In fact, they've never been better." I pretended to focus on where his own eyes were. "They're just a bit tired of lights blinking on and off in them."

"Well, that's all over with. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* will be staged in normal lighting."

"That's silly," I said, as we moved out into the hall. "We cats see so much better in the dark."

We were working on *Gypsy* when I finally betrayed myself. A silly thing, really. I was getting ready to walk out on stage in a full-length blue evening gown and formal gloves when I realized the prop mistress wasn't around to give me the white feather boa I was supposed to have for my "strip-tease."

"Ellen?" I said, but there was no response and my entrance cue was coming up. I quickly peeled off a glove and examined the prop station. No boa. I felt the wardrobe rack. On the third hanger from the left, I found it. I slipped it quickly around my shoulders and headed for the stage. As I mounted the raised runway that crossed just behind the apron, I heard Ellen, behind me, whisper, "Miss Harbau!" then cut off in a nervous giggle.

I ignored her. I had no choice; the first strains of "Let Me Entertain You" were already rising from the orchestra pit. I stepped out on stage.

The audience was not supposed to chuckle, but this audience did. Even the onstage audience was chuckling. I ignored them, too. I continued my strip-tease, flung my gloves, dropped my shoulder straps and went off, trailing my long skirt and boa.

Backstage, Ellen met me, anxiety at war with amusement. "Oh, Miss Harbau, I wish you'd waited. I was there with the boa in time. I just had to go back to the dressing room for it. But I was there."

"I have a boa," I said.

She giggled. "Oh, Miss Harbau, you're such a card. Imagine going out on stage with *that* thing!"

I froze, recalling the audience's reaction. "What's wrong with it?"

"Well... it's – it's bright orange."

I felt a chorus of eyes on me and tried to rally a sassy retort. "Well, of course, it's orange. I just wanted to see

if the audience was still awake."

There was an answering chuckle from the group around me.

"OK, Mare," said David from beyond the cluster of caste and crew, "you've had your little joke. Let's get the right boa onstage in the next scene, shall we?"

I could hear his smile and returned it, reaching out a hand toward Ellen. She thrust a feathery rope into it. Someone else laid my gloves over my bare shoulder. They slid off, forcing me to scrabble for them. I got them on, then pulled the boa into place.

"Mary!" exclaimed David. He disengaged the trail of fluff, then bent to pick up something. A moment later he wrapped another feathered stole around me and gave me a gentle shove toward the stage.

"Wrong one again," he said. His voice was odd.

He confronted me delicately in the short hiatus before the last scene. I had a costume change and was scrambling around behind a screen in a backstage corner.

"That bit with the boa wasn't a joke was it, Mary?" He stated it as fact, but gently.

I stiffened. Ah, I thought, the moment of truth. "Now what makes you say that?" I asked.

"Mary..." He sighed. "You're... you're colour-blind, aren't you?"

I laughed – sincerely. "How absurd. No, I am not colour-blind." I stepped from behind the screen.

"No? Then what colour is this?"

The smile I was wearing set rigidly in place around my mouth. I had no idea what "this" was, let alone what colour. I blinked.

"It's..." I sensed the movement of his right hand, seized on it eagerly and followed it with my eyes. "Well, if you'd just hold it still," I said.

He was silent.

"It's dark back here," I said.

"Oh, Mary."

I was trapped. "Oh, all right. You win. Yes, I admit it. I'm colour-blind."

"Oh, Mary," he said again.

"What?" I asked, impatient. "What?"

"It's in my other hand."

I jerked my eyes toward where his left hand must be. "What am I holding, Mary?"

This is absurd, I thought. You'd think I was afraid. "I don't know." I held out my hands. "Let me see it and I'll tell you."

He took a step nearer. "God," he said. "How long?"

"Since the last night of *Wait Until Dark*."

I could feel his stare slap my face. "How bad is it?"

"You mean, how blind am I? Completely. I can't see a thing."

"Does anyone else know?"

"Not even my doctor. He would have wanted me to have surgery or retire to a convent in New Hampshire or something. I don't have time for that. And speaking of time –" I started to move around him.

"Where are you going?"

"On stage. I have one more scene."

"You can't –"

I laughed.

"Oh, God," he said.

I finished out the run of *Gypsy*. It took a fight. David didn't seem to believe I could or should. I proved him

wrong night after night in a thousand little ways. I got on and off stage by myself (as always), and had no trouble finding my dressing room, costumes and props as he seemed to expect I would. Most important, I could navigate onstage just as well as any other member of the company. I could even distinguish the orange boa from the white one. (The dyed and treated feathers of the orange one were stiffer.)

The cast and crew insisted on being solicitous and overly polite and helpful. I tried to ignore them when I could and snapped at them when I couldn't.

The closing night of "Gypsy," David came to my dressing room with roses. "You were right," he said. "You did beautifully. You could teach some of the sighted actors a few things about stage direction."

"Sighted?" I asked. "Just because they have eyes doesn't mean they can see."

"Now, Mary –"

"You brought roses," I said. "Are they for me?"

The wrappings crackled like static as he lifted them. I held out my arms. It was a large bouquet, heavy and aromatic.

"Ah," I said, inhaling. "White ones. You remembered that I like white ones."

I had amazed him. "Yes, but... how can you tell?"

"There's a lot more to a rose than colour, David."

Later, as he drove me home, he asked me if I knew what he looked like.

"You have a beard," I answered. "And curly hair. You're very attractive."

"How do you know?" he asked, in a tone that said *aha!* "You said you were losing your vision before you joined the company."

"You're attractive," I repeated. "You – not your face or some other part or parts of your body. You."

"What colour are my eyes?" he asked, challenging.

"Does it matter?" We agreed it did not. We agreed about a good many other things as well: that moshu pork is the world's most wonderful taste; that the ocean makes the world's most wonderful sound; that rain didn't make us feel cold and miserable.

And, at last, we agreed that we loved each other.

He brought roses the night he asked me to marry him – a mixture of red and white and pink perfumes. ("A rainbow for my lady," he said.) We talked about the future and where to live and a honeymoon in his summer cabin on the beach at Swampscott and possible children and possible productions. He asked me about eye specialists and I lied and said I'd just seen one and that there was nothing he could do.

"I don't pity you," he told me when I asked.

"That's good," I said. "I don't pity you, either, even though you can't distinguish whitefish from cod or white roses from red without looking."

He gazed into my eyes then, and said, "It's amazing to me, Mary, it really is, that even though you can't see out, I can look into your eyes and see all the way to your soul."

He was quiet for a while and sad.

"What's wrong?"

"I was just thinking that I can look into you, know who you are, what you're thinking, whether you're happy or sad... You can't see me, at all."

I touched his face, felt the curl of beard, the nose, the cheeks, the frown. "David, who knows the house is full before anyone peeks through the curtain? Who can tell before you read the menu what the specialty is at Tony's? Who knows what you're going to say before you say it? I can hear and smell and feel all the way to your soul. David, I may be sightless, but I'm not blind."

He smiled beneath my fingertips. "No, nor will you let me forget that, I suspect."

"Count on it."

I sounded impossibly glib even to my own ears, but it was my only defence against the sudden realization that David and I were not created equal. Sighted, he would always feel superior. He would never mean to, of course, but he could not escape the desire to protect me, to coddle me, to take care of me. "Promise me," I said, grasping his hands, "that you will never treat me like a cripple."

"Good God, why should I? I swear, most of the time I have to remind myself that you're... that you can't see."

"There, you see? You can't even say it – blind."

"You're not blind – you said it yourself and I will not," he promised, "treat you like a cripple."

He didn't. Not at first. He let me find my way around the all-angles-and-stairs house with its tiny terraced garden. He left me alone to cook when I had the urge and the time, and he never, never mentioned my sightlessness to new acquaintances. A year after our wedding, there were still people who didn't have a clue.

Then, I became pregnant. David started watching me. Oh, well, he almost always watched me. But this was different. That was loving regard; this was... something else.

First, there were watchful silences as we read late at night – he, rustling pages; I, in complete silence. I wondered if he was feeling lonely with me comfortably lost in my full, dark world. You have no idea, those of you who must read hard, black words from stark, white pages, how to live inside stories – move in lock, stock and barrel and exclude everyone and everything. Did David mind being excluded?

Assuming that to be the case, I would give him my full attention whenever I felt his heavy gaze. I would laugh and talk to him about the company, tease him about finding roles for pregnant women. Sometimes he cried. He tried to hide that, but I know these things, because I know David.

He's lonely, I thought. I go where he can't follow – not even when he closes his eyes.

I prayed that when our child was born his loneliness would subside, and lavished my attention on him in greater amounts. It only seemed to make matters worse and, while we had moments of great joy and our relationship often seemed full and strong, his moods deepened, right along with his thoughtful, almost depressive silences.

I began to fear he was hiding something from me. I had tried the direct approach. "Is something wrong?" always bought me a monosyllabic negative followed by great, tender silences.

"Whatever ails ye, David Chamberlin?" I asked one evening in my best brogue. We were doing *Brigadoon* so it was well-oiled.

"Oh. Oh, nothing," he assured me and thought, I'm sure, that because I couldn't see his face, I couldn't tell he lied.

"You're lying," I accused him, dropping the accent. "Something is wrong. I know. I'm not stupid, David. Please, talk to me... Is it me? Am I such a burden?"

"Good God, no!" he exclaimed and dropped to his knees before my chair, capturing both my hands. "Mary, you could never be a burden. For one thing, you're too independent to burden anyone. And I don't think you're stupid. You're one of the brightest people I know."

I pondered that as we lay in bed that night. Too independent. Was that it? Had he married me, thinking he would have someone to nurture, then found me intractably self-sufficient? They joked about me, when we did *A Streetcar named Desire*, that my Blanche Dubois would absolutely never depend on the kindness of strangers. Well, I could try to depend on him more, I supposed. My self-sufficiency had been a necessary defence mechanism once – maybe now it was obsolete.

I dismantled his words again. The way he had said "I don't think you're stupid" – as if he did think I was something equally terrible, and was relieved I hadn't used that word instead. What did he think I was?

The baby kicked just then for the first time, and I gasped and grabbed David's shoulder and woke him up. "The baby kicked! David, the baby!"

Everything else was forgotten. David put his hands on my abdomen and waited, breathless, until he felt the sharp movements for himself. I – well, I hadn't been truly aware until that moment that there was someone sharing my dark world with me. That I was a world within a world. The realization stunned me absolutely.

David, too, was still... maybe with the same realization. "Mary," he said, his voice hushed. "Mary, how long has it been since you've seen your doctor?"

"It was just last week. You remember. We ate lunch at the Fish Market."

"No, I don't mean the obstetrician. I mean Dr Tillman. Your eye doctor."

"Dr Tillman?" My mystical euphoria was shattered. "It's been – I don't know – since before we were married."

"Don't you think it's time you paid him a visit? To see... if there might be some – some hope –"

"Hope of what?" I demanded, struggling to keep my voice weightless. "I've got nothing for him to examine. My eyesight is gone, David. Why in God's name can't you accept that?"

"There are new procedures every day, Mare. I don't think you've really explored that. You've been so afraid of disappointment."

Is that what he thought? "Disappointment over what? My unhappy condition? I'm not unhappy, David. I don't go about thinking, 'Dear God, if only You'd restore my sight!'"

"I know. And I adore you for that. It's inspiring, the way you go on –"

I sat up. "Next you're going to tell me I'm heroic. Stop it, David. I'm a woman whose eyes failed completely and forever – amen. End of chapter. Turn page. I have no intention of trying to go back in time. You don't get spare parts in this world, David."

"Yes, you do!" The bed bounced with his sudden exuberance. "You can! You could! Please, Mary. See Dr Tillman."

"Why? I've told you – I'm fine with this."

"Dammit, Mare, you're *too* fine with it. Look, if you won't do it for yourself, do it for me." Before I could open my mouth, he said, "Or, if you won't do it for me, do it for our baby."

"Our baby? What does our baby have to do with my eyesight?"

His zeal dissolved into a pool of melancholy tenderness. His hand stroked the place where our child lay, unsleeping. It shook with emotion. "Ever since we found out you were pregnant," he said, "it's haunted me – the idea that you'll never see our baby. Never see its first smile. Never get to watch me play with it."

"Not 'it,'" I said. "Her. It's a girl. David, I don't need to see her. I'll *know* her. She's inside me. She's part of me – part of my world."

He moaned aloud and dropped his head to my lap. "No! Stop it, Mary. Stop being so damned noble. So sacrificial."

"I'm not being noble at all. I'm *not* noble. I'm selfish. And honest. Trust me. This doesn't bother me. This is normal. So, I can't see her smile. I'll *feel* her smile, the same way I can feel her kick and squirm and roll. By the time she emerges, David, I will know our child in ways you cannot hope to imagine. Not just because you're not her mother, but because you can see."

He raised his head. I could feel his eyes padding across my face, blindly. He couldn't read me. "That's absurd," he told me. "How can sight keep me from knowing my own child?"

"I can't explain it. If you can't comprehend how my sightlessness makes me different –"

"Different?"

I made futile gestures in the dark. Especially futile since he could neither see them nor sense their meaning. "I sense things, David. You know that. I hear and feel and smell and taste things you don't or won't or can't. I can sense my daughter's soul," I said, in awe of the fact that it was true and I was sensing it now – right now, in the middle of all this. "You're upsetting her," I added, cupping a hand protectively over her. "Let's not talk about this any more."

He stared at me. Then he lay down and rolled over and left me alone with our daughter. He did not give up, though. David is a stubborn man. In the days that followed, he pleaded. He cajoled. He wheedled. He gnashed his teeth. He even cried unashamedly.

I loved my husband. I had no desire to make him unhappy. I was being intransigent – mulish, my mother would have said. Guiltily, fearing my unique relationship with our baby was becoming a dividing issue, I finally consented to an eye exam. David set up the appointment for me, but it was not Dr Tillman who examined me. It was a specialist named Cooper.

He was one of those uncommunicative types; a poker and prodder and flasher of tiny lights, who hummed and clucked and never said one comprehensible word until he had completed the exam. There were more machines than I remembered – refractors and reflectors and laser thises and thats, ad infinitum. There were even electrodes that a nurse stuck to my forehead and temples. I felt like a lab animal.

The things we do for love.

Afterward, Dr Cooper sat us down and spoke of "great strides in medicine." I could tell David was buy-

ing it, and it made me angry. He would be hopeful of a "cure" I neither needed nor wanted.

Cooper wanted to see me again. More tests, he said, to follow up on a particularly hopeful avenue. I almost refused, but the feel of David's hands clutching mine – caressing them – kept me muzzled.

David seemed happier and less moody with just this little dab of encouragement and I began to feel anxious. What would he do when his hopes were completely blasted? *But this, I told myself, is a man well-used to disappointment. He's had plays fold under him after one night.*

Ah, said a more realistic voice, *but this is his wife. This is his child. This is different.*

The next time we chatted with Dr Cooper – after a literal battery of tests – he seemed ambivalent, almost awkward. He said the results of my tests were "interesting."

Here it comes, I thought. Here comes the let-down. Sorry, Mrs Chamberlin, there's nothing we can do. Go on, say it.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions, Mrs Chamberlin," he said instead.

He was a watcher. He sat down across from me – almost knee to knee. I felt his ambivalence as something electric, arcing between us and racing up my leg like a static snake. Well, I had an expressive face for him to watch but it would only tell him what I wanted him to know.

"When, exactly, did you lose your sight?"

"Two years ago, April, exactly. The 19th. We were closing *Wait Until Dark*."

"And you never went to any specialists about your condition? Never went back to your own doctor? Why not?"

"Why should I have? I no longer had any eyes for anyone to adjust."

"Oh, you have eyes, Mrs Chamberlin. And, frankly, I can't find anything wrong with them."

We digested that bald statement in silence. I don't know what David was thinking; I was too busy trying to make sense out of what this absurd man had just said.

"You can't –" David began at last. "What do you mean, you can't find anything wrong with them? My wife is blind. How could there possibly –" His question ended in a cough of exasperation. I understood exactly how he felt.

"I mean the refraction/reflection series show an astigmatism, some myopia, but no occlusion, no rod damage – nothing that should cause blindness. As to the fluid balance in your wife's eyes – it's perfect." He turned back to me, his chair creaking – plastic on metal. "Mrs Chamberlin, I'd like you consider this next question very carefully. Did you sustain any trauma around the time you lost your sight?"

"Trauma?" I repeated. "Excuse me?"

"Either physical or emotional," he clarified. "Anything at all."

"No. No, of course not. Dr Cooper, I've been going blind all my life. It was just a matter of time."

I heard David clear his throat. "We were in the final night of a play Mary really loved."

"Yes, *Wait Until Dark*," said Cooper. "That's about a blind woman, isn't it? A very resourceful blind woman, if I remember correctly." He was staring at me – no, peering, gunslinger fashion – pressing my face.

"Yes," David said. "But surely you're not suggesting my wife —"

"There is no physiological reason for your wife's blindness, Mr Chamberlin. I'm suggesting the answer must lie somewhere else. I've a colleague who has had marked success in cases of hysterical affliction —"

"Hysterical?" I repeated. "I've never been hysterical in my entire life."

"It's a medical term, Mrs Chamberlin. It means simply that your blindness may have an emotional cause — or a psychological one."

"You're insinuating that I'm a mental case."

"No, I am not. I'm saying you may have sustained a trauma that robbed you of your eyesight. That could be good news. If your blindness was induced by trauma, then the cure could be as simple as determining the cause and working through it. I'd like to give you the name —"

I rose. "No, thank you. Why can't you just admit there's nothing that can be done? Why are you doing this to him?" I gestured dramatically at David and made a grand exit, ignoring them when they tried to call me back. I went out into the clinic's lounge and got a cup of coffee.

I was still nursing it 15 minutes later when David emerged from the doctor's office. He said nothing about what they'd been discussing all that time. In fact, we didn't talk all the way home.

"Imagine," I said finally, as we pulled into the driveway, "saying there was nothing wrong with my eyes. Telling me I'd just been traumatized. If I'd been traumatized, wouldn't I remember it?"

David's finger tapped the steering wheel, slowly. "You were heartbroken when I closed *Wait*."

"David! What a thing to say! Next you'll be telling me it's your fault I'm blind. Is that what you think? Do I have to be 'made whole' again so you can be absolved?"

"Dammit, Mary. Sometimes I think you *wanted* to go blind. To fulfil some childhood prophesy or to live out some martyr's wish. Sometimes I don't understand you. Sometimes it seems as if you live in a completely different world."

"Well, maybe I do," I said peevishly. "And maybe that's the way I like it. It's a nice world. A safe, comfortable, agreeable world."

"I want you to be part of *my* world, Mare." He struck the steering wheel and rocked the little car with zeal. "I want you to be part of *our* world — mine and our baby's."

It stopped me cold. Their world. Did he really believe —? *What do I say?* I wondered. *Do I tell him this child is the very core of my world? That my world enfolds her? Would it break his heart if I told him he will never know that world?*

Yes, it would. And breaking David's heart was not something I would willingly do. I kept my silence. Then. But later, when tempers sparked and we argued again — he, pressuring me to seek a cure — I told him. *He* was the outsider. He was the one incapable of sharing a collective world.

He was crushed. I could feel it in the sudden, fat silence that pressed our words to the floor. I felt horrid and guilty and spent all evening murmuring apologies while he said nothing and stroked my hair over and over.

I was six months along when I caught him in deception.

I was preparing to take a shower when I realized my hair was badly in need of a cut. I left the water running and went into the bedroom to call the salon, thinking they might squeeze me in today. I had the receiver to my ear before I realized there were voices vibrating in it.

"... connected to that play," said a man's voice, gravelled with age. "Her acquiescence in the face of the inevitable is far more telling. Mr Chamberlin, surely you can get her to come in for a visit. I simply can't diagnose her secondhand over the phone. All I can do for you is help you cope with her problem. Please, try to get her to see me."

"I wish I could, doctor. But she's six months pregnant. I'm afraid of what might happen to the baby if Mary is put under stress."

"Young man, if she is suffering from hysterical blindness, she must be under a tremendous amount of stress already." I returned the phone carefully to the cradle. I didn't want to hear any more. A psychiatrist. My husband was talking to a psychiatrist behind my back. My husband believed I had hysterical blindness. That it was all in my head.

I got into the shower like some zombie maiden from an old George Romero movie. The water pounded my astonishment and numb sense of betrayal, massaged and caressed and prodded my synapses into motion. I knew this was a burden for David. But how dare he betray my trust? He probably thought I was crazy. That old man on the phone was making him think I was crazy. The idiot. Did he really think the closing of a play would cause me to retreat into some stygian dream world? I'd never retreated from anything in my life. Now my own husband was afraid of stressing me and harming the baby... or was he afraid that stress would cause *me* to harm the baby?

She squirmed and kicked just then, then settled in upside down, pressing my diaphragm. How could he think it? Was I the false mother, willing, before Solomon, to have a living child sundered rather than acquiesce?

What would it hurt, I asked myself, to go along just a little? Let them sift through your thoughts and memories, for all the good it will do. Yes doctor, I could say, it was the cats'-eye frames. The sequined ones. Agony. Have you ever been called "four-eyes," doctor?

David came into the bedroom while I was dressing. He didn't put his arms around me the way he once did whenever he caught me half-naked somewhere. I nearly choked on sudden fear. Did he still love me, or had my passive resistance robbed me of that?

I panicked. "David," I said, and my voice slipped, trembling, out of my control. "David, I've been thinking. About what Dr Cooper said."

We were in love again for a week. I went to the psychiatrist, Vandemere — a likable curmudgeon with a warm, grey, gravel voice. We talked about trauma. I told him my life story. He told me nothing but that he had seen my *Gypsy* and thought me a brilliant actress. So full of life, he said. So obviously in love with the stage, with life. Had I no desire, he asked me, to see that life?

We talked about darkness, then. About darkness that is a presence in the room, about womb-like worlds, about where my baby lived. I knew where it was all going. Mary Harbau-Chamberlin wants to crawl back

into the womb, to escape from – God knows what – reality? I didn't let the old doctor know that I knew where we were headed. I didn't argue the points he was trying to make. It would have been futile.

David's moods did not improve as I'd expected they would. That concerned me. He seemed more irritable and distracted than ever, and we argued about the fact that I wasn't trying – that I was just going along for the ride. How did he know that, I wondered. How could he tell?

He began to leave me alone more often. Complaining of headaches, he'd go to bed early or seclude himself in his study. The fear that I was going to lose him came more frequently and stayed longer. I began to have nightmares about his leaving.

I was not in his current play – no parts for pregnant actresses – so theatre evenings I sat in our darkened house with my baby curled contentedly within. What would he do, I wondered, when it became obvious that there was no cure for my condition? I wasn't trying? What did he expect me to do? I told the doctor everything he wanted to know.

One night, late – about midnight – the opening and closing of the front door was followed by the sound of hell breaking loose in the front hall. A roar of sheer rage rolled upstairs, gathering momentum on the polished hardwood floors and banking off the walls. Our bedroom was the corner pocket. The roar collected there and jolted me out of bed.

I came downstairs in cautious haste to the sound of light switches snapping on in the hall. "David?" I called from the bottom of the stairs. "Are you all right?"

"Dammit, Mare!" he answered my concern. "I can't see in the damned dark! Why the hell do you insist on turning off all the lights? Do you want me to fall down and break my neck, or have you just forgotten that someone else lives here?"

"I'm sorry," I murmured, contrite.

"Thanks. I nearly killed myself and all but destroyed the hatrack."

He loved that stupid hatrack.

"I'm sorry," I said again, lighter on contrition, "but it seems silly to waste electricity when you're gone so much of the time. I don't need light."

"So you keep reminding me. Well, dear, I *do* need light and our child will need light, so get used to leaving the lights *on!*" The kitchen light switch tripped. "And what wattages are these damned bulbs? Good God, you'd think this was a French restaurant."

"I have no idea what wattages the bulbs are," I said, my temper roiling acidly in my stomach. The baby wriggled uncomfortably. "I don't care what wattages they are."

He flipped on the living-room lights while I followed his movements, turning to keep my face to him. "Why did you change them, then?"

"I didn't change them. Why should I change them?"

"I don't know. Maybe you think we should be a matched set. Maybe you want me to go blind too."

The baby lay absolutely still. "David that's a horrible thing to say. How could you even think something like that?"

"Oh, hell, I'm sorry. But it's just – damn!" His voice was sharp, tinged with rage or pain.

"What? What's wrong?"

"My head hurts... as usual."

"Oh, and that's my fault, I suppose."

He glared at me. I could feel the violence of his eyes pitting my cheeks like wind-flung pebbles. I wanted to cry, suddenly. This wasn't the way we started out – hurling asinine accusations at each other. One thinking the other wanted her committed, one believing the other wanted him to go blind. This was wrong. Impossibly wrong. We *belonged* together. We were meant to move side by side, not at tangents to each other.

"David..." I held out my arms, tears spilling down my cheeks. Now, he will hold me. Now, he will come to me and pull me into his arms.

"Oh, God," he said and went right past me into the hall. "I've got to go out for a while."

People who walk out of my life do not come back. I knew that. And I knew I had to do something to keep David from walking out. But there was nothing I could do. I couldn't pretend to recover my sight. There were too many ways to verify that. And things were so far gone between us, I wasn't even sure my "cure" would help. The only thing that kept him here was guilt, remorse. That and the baby. And once the baby was born...

I lay awake in bed, listening for David's return and having waking nightmares in which I was institutionalized while David took my baby and went on without me. David wanted her in his world of sight and sunlight and chaos. I wanted her in *my* world. A world in which a sea of visual input did not threaten to drown you every second. A world where faces did not intrude to coerce with smiles and subtly manipulate with disapproval.

David came home much later, smelling of white wine and cigarettes. I lay still until he was snoring suddenly beside me. Then I rolled over and stroked his poor head. I prayed for the headaches to cease. I prayed for him to understand that I was doing my best – that I didn't know what else to do or how to do it. I prayed hardest of all that he would not leave me – would not take my baby away from me and lock me up someplace "safe." He was strong-willed, stubborn. He could do that. *Would* do it, unless...

I lay very still and listened to the grandfather clock marking time in the silence of the downstairs hall. Dear God, maybe I *am* crazy. Is this where I break into demented cackling and beg God to take my husband's sight so he'll be the cripple and not I? I thrust the thought aside and begged forgiveness. *I just don't want to lose him*, I told God. *I just don't want to lose my baby.*

I told David that too, the next morning, and he held me for the first time in a long while. I told Dr Vandemere and he merely nodded and asked me why I thought I was going to lose my husband.

I tried very hard to dig down inside myself, then. I told him about my horrible, guilty half-wish and I cried. We talked about giving up on people and things, and I began to see, figuratively speaking, that I had given up on my eyes. That I had accepted, as inevitable, their complete dysfunction.

The revelation did not light up the room, neither did it seem to make David any happier. All the same, he and I no longer argued about my eyesight. He was too preoccupied with his own. After the night of the hatrack, he'd replaced the light bulbs throughout the house with hundred-watters. I talked to the landlord, who told me that none of the bulbs he'd removed were

less than 75 watts. He'd told David that too, and David had accused him of being innumerate. The landlord thought my husband was going crazy. He wasn't. He was just going blind.

I pondered this development deeply. I hadn't asked for this, but it seemed that Higher Powers were in control. Did I feel remorse? Sorrow? Yes, of course. I love my husband. It hurt me to sense his vulnerability, his distress. And yet, I knew that vulnerability was the only thing that could give our marriage a second chance. I would take care of him, I vowed. The way he always wanted to take care of me and couldn't. I was powerful this way. Darkness was my ally; it was his jailer.

He was wearing tinted contacts by the time our daughter was born. They did little more than keep intense light from sparking the headaches. He was legally blind already. Still, he was in the delivery room, holding my hand through the pushing and grunting and swearing that accompanies every new human being into the world.

I gave a last push and knew I'd completed my part in the process. I felt my daughter land on my stomach, squirming. *There, I thought. There she goes, out into the glaring assault of hospital lights where she will cry and think them bright until she meets the Sun.* Small wonder newborns wail. To be so rudely expelled from the dark and warm and safe. Instant agoraphobia. Chaos and light and noise.

Actually, there was less noise than I expected. The baby cried, the nurses cooed, the doctor murmured instructions. David asked over and over, "Is she beautiful? Is she all right?"

"She's fine," I said, already fondling the wet, warm, lovely girl. "She's fine. I know. I can feel her."

"Your daughter," the doctor said, "seems perfectly healthy and normal, Mr Chamberlin, would you like to cut the cord?"

I could feel David's hesitation. "I can't. I can't see... what I'm doing."

The doctor mumbled an apology and cut the cord himself. After an all too brief time of getting to know my little girl, she was taken off for testing and I was cleaned up and taken to my room on the floor. It wasn't until several hours later that the obstetrician came by

to see us, bringing with him, not my daughter, but a second doctor – a paediatrician named Solars. It seemed they had come to ask questions. I often think that's every doctor's over-riding passion.

"Mrs Chamberlin," asked Dr Solars, "how long have you been blind? Is it a congenital condition?"

"I don't know," I answered, wondering why on earth they should care. When they asked David the same question, I felt a cold lump form in my heart. They doubted our competence to take care of our own daughter. I didn't hear David's answer to their question. "We can take care of her," I said. "We're both quite competent, I assure you. There's no reason why we shouldn't be able to care for a sighted child."

There was an awkward silence and then Dr Solars exhaled loudly. "Mr and Mrs Chamberlin," she said. "I don't know how to say this, except to just say it. Your daughter is blind."

David is a very quiet man these days. A confused man, I think. His face and voice are full of lines and channels that weren't there before. He doesn't seem to understand that his daughter, Yelena, is happy and that that, alone, matters. Darkness is natural to her in a way not even I knew. It's her birthright.

I know the thought has crossed his mind that I did this to her, somehow. When the doctors left us that first day of Yelena's life, he turned to me and asked, "How did you –?" He didn't finish the thought. He didn't have to.

It frightens me to ponder what that says about his state of mind – his sanity. That he could actually contemplate the idea that I have – I don't know – some sort of magical powers? I comfort myself that he is only asking questions and not advancing crazy theories. That we are blind is enough reason for some people to doubt our capacity to parent Yelena; that they should suspect one of us was losing touch with reality doesn't bear thinking about.

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Ian R MacLeod

fiction

David Langford

<http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/iplus>

Stephen Baxter

Molly Brown

Keith Brooke

insight

infinity plus

Nicholas Royle

Eric Brown

critique

Jonathan Wylie

Let's be frank: bug movies come pretty low in the scheme of things. To evolve them into something higher up the foodchain, you need to adapt them to mimic their predators, enabling a mindless assemblage of rigid behaviours and gelatinous secretions to pass as something intelligent and human. In the case of *Mimic*, what seems to have lured Guillermo del Toro (the stylish and batty Mexican maker of *Cronos*) is the metaphoric potential of what turns out to be a one-off genre mutation of its own, the first bug movie about Catholicism. Audiences might well wonder at first why the opening quarter-hour sets up an unwieldy and apparently-superfluous backstory ("TWO YEARS AGO" ... "THREE YEARS LATER") about a roach-borne epidemic beaten by Mira Sorvino's release of an engineered mutant strain, with mentor F. Murray Abraham loitering doomily in the background pulling leathery scowls and thinking *in three years' time I'm going to say I told you so*. Initially, it seems as if we're just going to get a rather clumsy sermon on the ethics of releasing genetically-modified organisms into the ecosystem when you don't know they're not going to mutate into eight-foot people-eating killer roaches in the sewers.

But del Toro has a uniquely south-of-the-border take on this narrative. Delicately but insistently he sets his Italian-American heroine up as a lapsed Catholic scientist who has tried to flush her guilt hygienically down the toilet, only for it to breed down in the dark places civilized people don't go, requiring a perilous descent into the lower world to harrow the hell her own sins have created. As the by-numbers narrative unfolds, and the plot requirements converge (as ever) on *Finding the Nest* and *Killing the Fertile Male* (traditionally the queen, but hey, this is the 90s), adroitly gruesome set pieces are enlivened by ever more bizarre and fetishistic flourishes of Bunuel-esque imagery, like the autistic Hispanic child tiptoeing wide-eyed through a quarantined church rustling with giant roach-people. All this builds to a crescendo of weirdness at the showdown, when Sorvino lures the satanic male roach to the scent of her blood by inflicting stigmata on her palms with her religious jewellery, to redeem the world in a thrillingly silly set piece in which she becomes saviour and holy mother in a single iconic moment.

It's anyone's guess what the much-missed Don Wollheim would have made of this exotic mutation of his original story. Certainly the core idea, the bugs' anthropomorphic infiltration of their human predators, is rather pushed to the margins in this final mutation, with the result that you spend most of the movie expecting it to culminate in one of several neatly



Nick Lowe

nasty final twists that don't in fact materialize. Still, it's an effectively mechanical and repulsive specimen of its genus, whose mimicry of something sophisticated and stylish doesn't really go deeper than the wing-casing, and which is mercifully uninterested in saying anything serious about science, faith, and ethics once the set pieces line up and the gel starts to drip from the ceiling. From pulp it came, and pulp it happily remains.

At the opposite end of the Hollywood chain of being, we already have the first bolide event in what promises to be a long and trying summer of global devastation. I just hope the rest of the season's total-the-world smash'emups are a bit more fun than the hubristically-titled *Deep Impact*, a ponderous and wilfully old-fashioned disaster epic of a kind they usedn't to make any more, and with good reason. *Independence Day* got away with it by resisting all pressure to take its genre seriously; *Deep Impact* thinks you can play this stuff straight, and to that end has signed up the Writers' Guild's two most distinguished eschatologists, Michael Tolkin (don't think of *The Player*, but of fundamentalist fantasy *The Rapture*) and Bruce Joel Rubin (whose obsessive string of death movies include *Ghost*, *Jacob's Ladder* and *My Life*). No sources are credited, but it's clear that Clarke's *Hammer of God* novel and the dreary 1979 movie *Meteor* have been especially keenly studied; and between then, the doomsday duo have ransacked the tropes of the impact-event genre to come up with a script of airport-novel obesity and languor that wears its aspirations to epic like a suit of clunking lead armour.

The principal problems with bolide movies are twofold. First, you can't actually destroy the world without dealing the punters a bit of a downer, which is awkward when that's what they've actually paid to see. Worse still, everyone spends the whole of the film waiting for the final ten minutes, with nothing to pad the time but futile last-ditch attempts to abort the climax ("I regret to announce that our missiles have failed") and endless setting-up of soapy human-interest plotlines. *Deep Impact* tries to deal with these (as, I may misremember, did *Meteor*) by splitting the climax into two: a small, survivable fragment that strikes first and only takes out the eastern states, oh and Europe and Africa, and a big extinction-level motherwhumper that will mean the end of civilization if Robert Duvall doesn't manage to nuke it into upper-atmosphere fireworks, unexplainedly managing to avoid saturating the globe with enriched uranium smitherens in the process. It's good to know, as the newsmen say when the crew is chosen, that we're going to have someone of star quality up there.

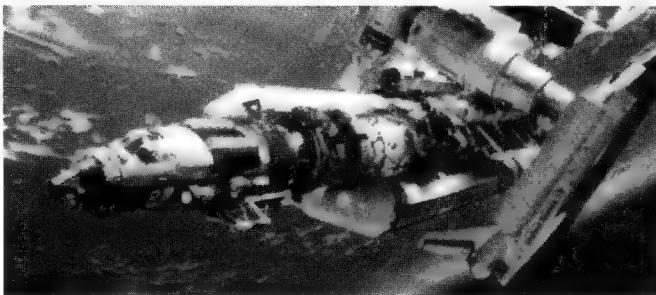
For the most part, *Deep Impact* is glum stuff, and faintly distasteful in a host of ways that individually wouldn't amount to much but collect into a choke-sized furball as the clock ticks its leisurely way. Thus, for example, military cooperation with the production is cemented by some unsubtle defence of defense as a budgetary priority ("a technology developed to propel weapons of mass destruction will be used to repel the greatest threat mankind has ever known"). The supposedly-democratic lottery for lifeboat places is craftily set up to exclude migrants, and turning

out to be conveniently subversible by croneyism and favour-cashing. Expendability correlates closely with age, with the older cast members gazing nobly from the decks of their global *Titanic* as the fateful waters loom closer. Tea Leoni's anchor character is given a choice – this must be Rubin – between telling her dad she loves him and staying alive, and goes for the former, proving at least that nature is ruthless in selecting for smarts. Meanwhile, up in the hills, "Come on," chivvies Elijah Wood as he and his girl race the apocalypse to higher ground – but without (for example) assisting by taking the baby. There are certainly moments not easy to forget – particularly the freeway jammed with more cars than you've ever seen commandeered for a single movie before, unless some of them have been matted in, and which says more than it intends about how Americans think about apocalypse. But at heart this is a meretricious attempt to validate through dumbed-down science what is essentially a rather unpleasant religious and survivalist fantasy about the sounding of the trump that will separate sheep from goats, the saved from the damned, and hard ideological truth from slushy liberal equivocation. Dispiritingly symptomatic is the failure to include some dedication or at least commemorative notice for Gene Shoemaker, merely credited as a consultant. The final word of authority rests with President Morgan Freeman, who publicly proclaims in a live broadcast to the nation his trust in his Creator to deliver the goods – which He duly does, pausing only to obliterate the east-coast Gomorrah's lying farthest from Hollywood, leaving His chosen people to go west and sin no more.

And then, just when all hope seems hopeless, from the flipside of the world comes *Dark City*, pet project of *The Crow*'s Alex Proyas, made not in Hollywood but out of Oz, and set in a cinematic universe quite literally all its own. If *Dark City* were only a haunting, painterly vision of a dreamworld, exquisitely designed and shot, and peopled by all kinds of unlikely faces as you've never seen them before, it would still be the best thing this year. What's extraordinary is that it's also a literate, sophisticated cinematization of a classic sf idea in a finely-crafted narrative of conceptual breakthrough, awakening memories of *Ubik*, Crowley's *The Deep*, and much Philip José Farmer – as well as of later Dennis Potter, who remarkably gets an actual dedication. But it's sufficiently sui-generis that specific debts are hard to allege, and if there's a single dominant influ-

ence it's Proyas's thoughtful respect for the sensibility of comics, whose influence on *fin de siècle* sf cinema in the hands of Gilliam, Burton and Jeunet/Caro has created a whole exotic sub-genre of parallel-universe movie set in worlds like ours but with better conceptual designers.

One of the key attractions of such estranged elsewhere is that big bom-



Above and previous page: stills from *Deep Impact*

bastic ideas sit much more comfortably in these reality-diminished settings. In *Dark City*, Proyas's stunning noirville harbours an enormously ambitious thought-experiment about memory and personal identity, in the tale of a dying alien hive-race that abducts humans to study their individuality in an island city in deep space, constructed and nightly remodelled from the abductees' shuffled memories. Thus the designer dreamscape is literally that, and its rationale (something these movies normally disdain) is the big question posed explicitly at the turning-point: "Are we in fact more than the sum of our memories?" It's no discredit to the film's achievement that in the end the ideas prove just a little too big for the movie, answering the question with some vague guff about souls, and leaving both the murder hunt and the hero's own identity quest finally unresolved. Co-writer Lem Dobbs, the hyphenate wordsmith who scripted Soderbergh's *Kafka*, has clearly been crucial to shaping a narrative that can carry its metaphysical baggage, and his no less Kafkaesque cat-&-mouse cop plot is finely served by its principals: *Lost in Space* notwithstanding, William Hurt is morphing into a powerful character actor as he sheds his leading-man looks with advancing age, while Rufus Sewell's B-movie features sit just right in this genre-rich frame. And of course it looks great, though my impressions may be tinted by the realization afterwards that I'd sat through the whole thing with my shades on.

In re comics, though, a little word for the matinée midget *Star Kid*, a title nobody over ten would be seen dead buying a ticket for. Since nobody but divorced fathers on Saturday is likely to have seen this, I should synoppose that this is a tale of a galactic war between good and bad aliens

(think *Starship Troopers*) that spills over to earth when the beleaguered goodies eject their secret weapon over our skies: a sentient combat exosuit that gives any sufficiently pint-sized wearer all kinds of cool powers. As luck would have it, the finder is Joseph Mazzello out of *Jurassic Park*, a comics-obsessed and bullied geek who longs to be a superhero so he can duff up the playground bully, come on to the class goddess and restore functionality to his momless family. But there's a catch! the bad aliens have dispatched their top warrior-caste assassin to recapture the suit, and it's only a truly supervillainly incompetence and inability to shoot straight that enables our hero to save the day, the galaxy, and the safe negotiation of his nascent hormonal twinges.

Obviously, this is an engagingly shameless indulgence of the fantasies of the kind of kid who'd be watching this film on a Saturday afternoon instead of being out playing footie. As such, though, it does probe quite keenly into the mindset of the preteen comics fan: the longing to be able to interact with the world like a polygon animation; the solipsistic desire for a secret friend who knows exactly what you're feeling; the idyll of a family life in which your big sister respects you, your dad gives you priority, and your big-crush biology teacher becomes your new mom; the hopeless yearning for a fantasy girlfriend who simultaneously likes comics and has styled hair. And there are gratifying touches of maturity: the playground thug isn't demonized, but enlisted as ally and finally friend; the killer alien is finally trashed without the help of Mazzello's virtual body; and even the utility level of the obligatory self-help platitudes is a tad higher than average for the target audience ("if you run away from the things you're scared of, it doesn't get any better"; "think of someone you really admire, and ask yourself what would they do"). You still have to put up with lines like "Your father and sister feel very strongly for you, earth biotic" (compulsory as one or other is likely to have paid for the ticket) – and finally, after our hero has defeated his terror unaided, "You no longer need a cybersuit" (if no sickbag available, use empty popcorn bucket). But it's all a lot healthier than the reactionary millennial hysteria of *Deep Impact*, and unlike bigger films that have hired science consultants it feels no obligation to throw any compensatory sop to theism. In Hollywood's tree of life, the further up the predator chain the closer you are to God; but the faithful should remember His inordinate fondness for bugs.

Nick Lowe



Riverdance Meets Camelot

Mike Ashley

It was with a mixture of relief and reservation that I went to a preview of *The Magic Sword*, the new full-length Arthurian animated feature film from Warner Brothers. Relief because it was released at last after years in production; and reservation because I had no idea what treatment would be given to the original book, *The King's Damosel* by Vera Chapman. Most of Chapman's close family (her daughter, grandsons and many great-grandchildren) were at this preview and I was anxious that they would see something worthy of their grand matriarch. Chapman died just two years ago, aged 98, so the film is being released in her centenary year.

I needn't have worried too much. Although the film bears little resemblance to Chapman's book, it was good fun and, more to the point, it kept the children in the audience entranced throughout its 78 minutes. When I spoke to the family afterwards I found they shared my feelings, but the general consensus seemed to be they were pleased with it and, what is more, they thought "Vera would have enjoyed it."

The Magic Sword is Warner Brothers' first full-length, fully-animated feature film but I found it almost indistinguishable from a Disney feature film. It has all the same mix of humour, way-out fun characters, excellent animation and artwork, especially the scenic backdrops, and some very effective computer-generated imagery for the troll. The music is lively, especially the work by Patrick Doyle, which gives the film a Celtic mood. In fact at the start, with the celebrations in the village square, I thought we were about to be presented with *Camelot* meets *Riverdance*.

The songs are rather average, but then I dislike most film songs. They are adequate to their task and I suspect one or two of them, especially "The Prayer," performed by Andrea Bocelli, will be popular. They were all composed by Carole Bayer Sager and David Foster.

The storyline itself is unimaginative. It certainly has nothing of the characterization or depth of vision of Vera Chapman's original and rather

groundbreaking book. For some reason they even changed the name of the lead heroine from Lynett to Kayley. In the book Lynett is one of two daughters of Sir Lionel. In her youth Lynett is raped by Sir Bagdemagus. After her father's death their home is visited by the evil Sir Ruber who seeks the hand of Lynett's sister. When refused, Ruber lays siege to the castle. Lynett escapes to seek help and her courage brings her to the notice of King Arthur who makes her his Damosel Errant. Lynett subsequently confronts Bagdemagus and then enters upon a quest for the Grail. In her travels she meets a blind man, Lucius, who dwells in a cave, and through him she gains a greater insight into her own character. That's the bare bones of the book, and Vera Chapman dwelt considerably on the character of Lynett to show her own inner struggles and coming to terms with her harsh realities of life.

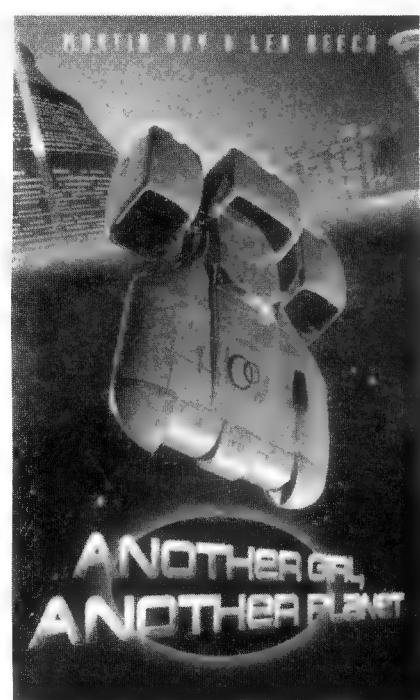
Precious little of this is in the film. The storyline had already been converted into a story by Jacqueline Feather and David Seidler before being shaped into the screenplay by Kirk de Micco and William Schifrin. By then it had become so Disneyfied (or should that be toonified?) that it was almost a new story. The film follows the rebellion of Sir Ruber, a total stereotyped villain (with an irritating cockney-like voice by Gary Oldman) who believes Britain should be led by a strong ruler, not the weakened wimp that King Arthur (voice, Pierce Brosnan) has become. Arthur plays only a small part in the film, and he is a wimp, a most unbelievable king, and pretty much a waste of space. Ruber contrives to gain Excalibur and has the sword stolen by his pet Griffin, but the Griffin is attacked and drops the blade into the Forbidden Forest. Ruber attacks Kayley's home, but Kayley (voice, Jessalyn Gilsig) escapes and flees to Camelot for help. She realizes her only hope is to find Excalibur before Ruber and his evil henchmen, and the rest of the film is her quest through the forest to find the sword. En route she meets a young blind man, Garrett (voice, Cary Elwes), who has turned his back on Camelot and has no wish to be hin-

dered by Kayley, but eventually the two team up to find the sword. They're also helped by the main comic character of the film, the two-headed dragon Devon (voice, Eric Idle) and Cornwall (voice, Don Rickles). The two heads are always arguing, and as a consequence can't do any of the things dragons normally do, like fly and breathe fire, and it isn't until Kayley is captured by Ruber that they realize they could do these things if they combined their efforts.

The film is essentially played for laughs, and it is good fun. There are some clever spoofs of other films, such as when Devon and Cornwall discover they can fly and take off to the music from the *Superman* movies, or when one of the characters imitates Dirty Harry with "make my day." These were probably lost on the children, but the adults chuckled.

It is as a children's film that I have to commend it. It is disappointing that more was not made of Chapman's original book, but I suppose it is a major step forward for a cartoon to have a strong heroine lead and a blind hero. And if this alerts youngsters to the Arthurian legend and fantasy, that's all to the good. I don't know yet whether there will be a "book of the film," but if there is, don't forget the original. It's far superior to any likely script-novelization.

Mike Ashley



This month's cover art is by Fred Gambino (Sarah Brown Agency) and was produced originally for the cover of *Another Girl, Another Planet* by Martin Day and Len Beech (a thinly-disguised pseudonym if ever we heard one), a forthcoming publication in Virgin Books' series of New Adventures.

LOOP

Alexander Glass

ГООНЬ ГООНЬ ГООНЬ ГООНЬ ГООНЬ

LOOP LOOP LOOP LOOP LOOP LOOP

The probe was malfunctioning.

It understood that there was something wrong, that an error buried deep in one of its sub-programs was causing it to move steadily farther and farther away from the point in space where it ought to have been. It knew that it was lost, and that it knew of no way to re-orient itself. That knowledge did not worry it unduly. It had searched its memory banks, and found a human term that tallied quite well with what it was experiencing: *unease*. Not worry – that would have been a response disproportionate to the situation – but unease.

It flexed a fin, moving a photovoltaic arm into a position where it might make best use of the distant suns behind it. The power it could glean from this was so little that it hardly justified the power expended in moving the fin; but the probe knew its nuclear core had a strictly limited life, and wanted to extend that life as long as it could. Its energy-collecting ability was already severely reduced: one of the three solar fins was gone altogether, and the emergency reactor was becoming unreliable. The probe could not remember what had caused the damage. It had re-activated itself, apparently spontaneously, to find that it was heading in entirely the wrong direction. It had promptly made corrections, as best it could, but the data that had been lost was now gone forever.

The problem, it realized, was probably in the bioweb memory. The self-replicating protein strands were sup-

posed to be the most efficient medium for long-term preservation of memory. Three separate cell cultures were kept, for parity-checking and to guard against biological crises: three groups of microscopic organisms, holding all the data the probe needed in order to function, written into unused codices on each chromosome. Perhaps the probe's prolonged exposure to cosmic rays had caused a mutation in the cultures. Or possibly there had been one single, catastrophic incident, perhaps a collision or an explosion. The probe knew that its episodic memory had been erased before a certain point in time, a fact which only added to its unease. What if it had been so badly damaged that it had begun to mistake its functions? Worse, what if it had been tampered with, and was now no longer serving the purpose it was intended to serve, but some other purpose entirely?

It re-oriented its antennae and sent out a contact signal in all directions, as it did every 10,000 cycles. As usual, there was no reply; or if there was, it was so far away that its contents would surely be irrelevant by the time the message reached the probe. The probe had lost its bearings – it had drifted far beyond the stars it knew. It was diligently mapping everything it came across, but the maps were of limited use, as they could not be related to any of the charts it already possessed. At some point during that gap in its memory, the probe had left behind everything it knew.

A warning signal from its forward sensors interrupted its usual routine. There was something there, at the limit of its perceptual range, something small, something solid. It seemed to be regular in shape, implying that it was artificial. The probe ran a subroutine to examine the various possibilities. The object might be a freak occurrence, a piece of space debris that had been hammered into a regular shape by natural means. This was unlikely, but the probe had come across stranger things, and so could not discount the possibility. Then, the object might be an alien probe of some kind, or a place marker, a buoy, or the remains of some larger artefact. It was even conceivable that if the object was an alien way-stone, it would contain navigation information and maps, which the probe could copy and decipher at leisure. These various possibilities were interesting enough to investigate, so the probe altered its course a little and drifted on to intercept the object.

There was no hurry. The object was not employing any method of propulsion, but drifting under its own inertia, just as the probe was. The probe had only to wait until it reached the object; that would take some millions of cycles, of course, but the probe was in no hurry. Its mission was to explore and report back, although it could no longer be sure exactly where it should be reporting back to. There had been no time constraints placed on its mission, as far as it was aware. It could afford to take its time.

There were no signs of life from the object, and when the probe came closer, it understood why that was. The object measured exactly two metres by one metre by one metre: it was a human coffin. The body was perfectly preserved, of course, frozen to within a few degrees of absolute zero. Sooner or later, it would pass close to a star, and the heat from that star would revive the micro-organisms that would begin to rot the flesh; but then, the coffin would probably be pulled into orbit and, finally, cremated as it neared the surface of the sun. The probe examined the corpse: it was a female, not young, but not old enough, by appearances, to have died a natural death. The face seemed familiar, and the probe ran a search with the woman's features as the key. It was successful: the woman had died in a ship-board accident, on a freighter called the *Silversmith*. Yet that had been on the other side of the Cluster, light years away. According to the memory banks, the probe had never encountered this human before. And yet it had been sure that her face had triggered a memory. It wondered whether the memory had been lost, along with the other missing data, and whether a ghost of that memory lingered on, causing this confusion.

That was a minor mystery. A more pressing problem was what the body was actually doing here – wherever "here" was. The coffin should not have been here; it should have been on the far side of the Cluster, and getting farther away all the time. As far as the probe was aware, this was uncharted territory. There had been no humans here before, let alone civilizations sophisticated enough to sustain freighters like the *Silversmith*. There were two possibilities: firstly, that the probe's memory was even more badly damaged than it had supposed, and it was now wasting its time conscientiously mapping an area of the universe that had been known to humans for centuries; secondly, that while the probe had

been travelling, the humans had succeeding in solving the problems of FTL travel, and could now go where they wished in the blink of an eye. That would explain why the probe had received no signals, no instructions: it was obsolete, and its precious store of data was unwanted. But even assuming that humans had reached this point, and found themselves having to eject a dead crew member, they would hardly send her coffin drifting back towards the Cluster. That would be against tradition; it would be bad form, the probe told itself, borrowing another phrase from the human dictionary. Standard practice was to send coffins out towards the Void, where they could theoretically drift on forever.

Another possibility was that, in fact, the coffin was heading towards the Void, and the probe, its guidance systems confused, was heading back towards the Cluster. Perhaps it was even in the wrong quadrant: perhaps it had drifted around the cluster without realizing it. Concerned, the probe interrupted its standard cycle in order to double-check. The suns behind it were displaying blue shift, and that was as it should be. On a pseudo-random impulse, the probe examined the stars ahead, and found that they, too, were displaying blue shift. That could not be right: all the stars it could detect appeared to be moving, slowly but inexorably, towards that exact point in space. If the probe stayed there, it was liable to be caught in the midst of an almighty stellar collision. A rapid calculation revealed that that collision was millennia away, but it was still worrying. There should be no blue shift here at all: the outermost stars of the Cluster should be travelling away, into the Void, at greater speeds than the stars behind them.

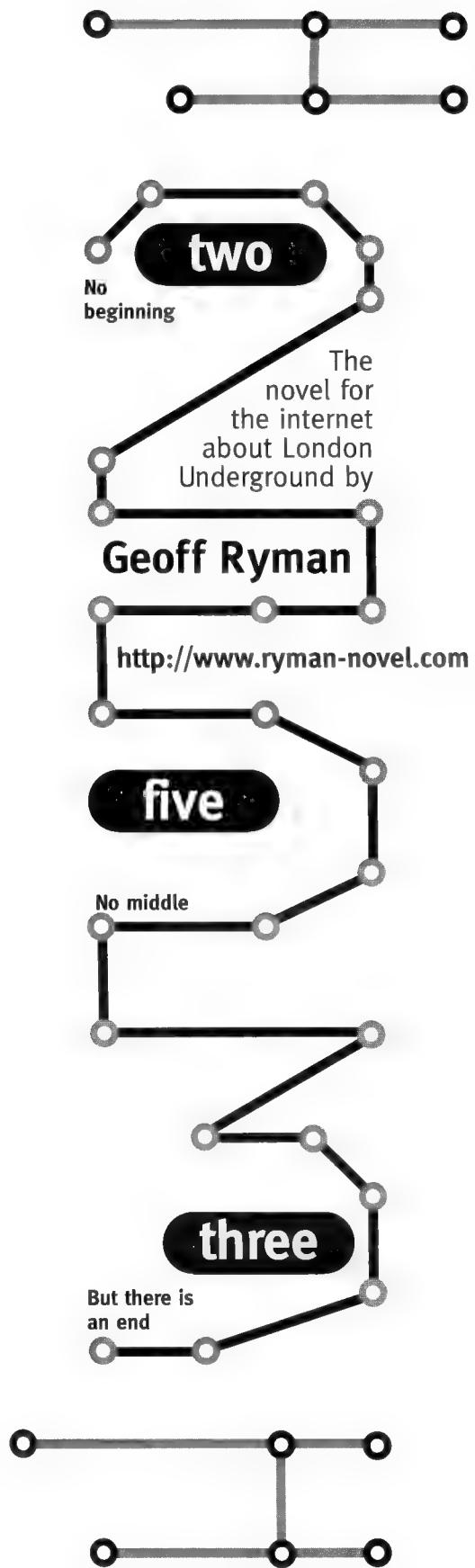
The probe marked the positions of the stars within range of its sensors, partly for the sake of having a complete record, and partly so that if it felt the slightest confusion about which way it ought to be heading it could remind itself with one glance at the map.

Gently, it stopped the coffin and turned it around, so that the body would journey out into the Void, as it should. Then it left the coffin behind, and drifted on.

Ten thousand cycles later, it found itself in a microvoid, an empty space within the boundaries of the Cluster. These became more and more frequent as one progressed away from the centre. To avoid wasting energy on making records of a place where there was obviously nothing to be found, the probe induced a temporary shutdown.

Another 10,000 cycles later, it awoke in some alarm. The sensors reported an increase in the number of stars ahead displaying blue shift. The probe examined a broad range of the approaching stars, and calculated their trajectories. Those with the most pronounced blue shift were directly ahead; as the probe examined stars to the left and right, the shift became less and less pronounced. That suggested that it was drifting towards a sphere made by stars expanding from a central point; perhaps it was witnessing some previously unidentified stage of stellar generation. And yet the conceptual sphere seemed too big for that. The probe decided to expend some energy on a more difficult calculation: an estimation of the volume of the approaching group of stars.

The calculation took 40,000 cycles to complete, and another 40,000 to double-check, because the probe was unable to believe its results. The approaching stars



seemed to constitute the outer surface of a sphere the size of another physical universe. Yet it was not another universe, the probe realized. This was the same universe it had left behind. It was the Flores-Stravic Point, the point at which the four-dimensional sphere of the universe began to intersect with itself.

The probe had no time to consider the implications of this, for a warning was directing its attention – urgently – to the bioweb memory. The cultures had grown, as they did periodically, according to their natural cycles. The probe kept track of their biorhythms, as it had been instructed to do, though why this should be important was not quite clear to it. It was also not sure what had led to the warning being given. The cycles of the three cultures were converging, each one coincidentally reaching a crisis point, a point of maximum growth, after which they would all experience a sudden decline.

Too late, the probe realized why it was required to monitor the cultures' rhythms: a culture that went into decline would lose the excess data it was carrying, and be stripped down to the bare essentials. When all three cultures did this at once, the probe was required to make a copy to silicon, so that it would experience no memory loss. That must have been what had happened to it before: a minor malfunction, which meant that it had not made the silicon copy, had resulted in its episodic memory having been lost.

Helplessly, the probe watched as the three cell cultures reached crisis point, and then collapsed.

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It realized that it was heading in entirely the wrong direction, heading back into the Cluster rather than out towards the Void. It promptly made corrections, and ran a complete self-scan. Its episodic memory had been wiped. The loss was unfortunate, but the probe's mission remained the same.

A warning signal from its forward sensors interrupted its usual routine. There was something there, at the limit of its perceptual range, something small, something solid. It seemed to be regular in shape, implying that it was artificial. The probe was confused for a moment, wondering whether it had come across this object before; but it had no record of it. It altered course slightly, and, conscientious as ever, went to investigate.

Alexander Glass is a new young writer who lives in London. His first three published stories were "Carla's Eye" (IZ 130), "Upgrade" (IZ 131) and "Storage" (IZ 132). We didn't publish a story by him in issue 133, thus spoiling a remarkable run, but here he is back again...

Toast

A CON REPORT

Charles Stross

Old hackers never die; they just sprout more grey hair, their t-shirts fade, and they move on to stranger and more obscure toys.

Well, that's the way it's supposed to be. *Your Antiques!* asked me to write about it, so I decided to find out where all the old hackers went. Which is how come I ended up at Toast-9, the ninth annual conference of the Association for Retrocomputing Meta-Machinery. They got their feature, you're getting this con report, and never the two shall meet.

Toast is held every year in the Boston Marriot, a piece of disgusting glass-and-concrete cheesecake from the late 1970s post-barbarism school of architecture. I checked my bags in at the hotel reception then went out in search of a couple of old hackers to interview.

I don't know who I was expecting to find, but it sure as hell wasn't Ashley Martin. Ashley and I worked together for a while in the early zeroes, as contract resurrection men raising zombies from some of the big iron databases that fell over on Black Tuesday: I lost track of him after he threw his double-breasted Compaq suit from a tenth floor window and went to live in a naturist commune on Skye, saying that he was never going to deal with any time-span shorter than a season ever again. (At the time I was pissed off; that suit had cost our company 15,000 dollars six months ago, and it wasn't fully depreciated yet.) But there he was, ten inches bigger around the waist and real as taxes, queuing in front of me at the registration desk.

"Richard! how are you?"

"Fine, fine." (I'm always cautious about uttering the social niceties around hex-heads: most of them are oblivious enough that as often as not a casual "how's it going?" will trigger a quarter-hour stack-dump of woes.) "Just waiting for my membership pack..."

There was a chime and the door of the badge printer sprang open; Ashley's membership pack stuck its head out and looked around anxiously until it spotted him.

"Just update my familiar," I told the young witch on

the desk; "I don't need any more guides." She nodded at me in the harried manner that staff on a convention registration desk get.

"The bar," Ashley announced gnomically.

"The bar?"

"That's where I'm going," he said.

"Mind if I join you?"

"That was the general idea."

The bar was like any other con bar since time immemorial, or at least the end of the post-industrial age (which is variously dated to December 31st, 1999, February 29th, 2000, or March 1972, depending who you talk to). Tired whisky bottles hung upside down in front of a mirror for the whole world to gape at; four pumps dispensed gassy ersatz beer; and a wide range of alcohol-fortified grape juice was stacked in a glass-fronted chiller behind the bar. The bar top itself was beige and labelled with the runes *DEC* and *VAX 11/780*. When I asked the drone for a bottle of Jolt they had to run one up on their fab, interrupting its continuous-upgrade cycle; it chittered bad-temperedly and waved menacing pseudopodia at me as it took time out to spit caffeinated water into a newly spun bucky-bottle.

Ash found a free table and I waited for my vessel to cool enough to open. We watched the world go by for a while: there were no major disasters, nobody I knew died, and only three industry-specific realignments or mergers of interest took place.

"So what brings you here, eh?" I asked eventually.

Ashley shrugged. "Boredom. Nostalgia. And my wife divorced me a year ago. I figured it was time to get away from it all before I scope out the next career."

"Occupational hazard," I sympathized, carefully not questioning the relationship between his answer and my question.

"No, it bloody isn't," he said with some asperity, raising his glass for a brief mouthful followed by a shudder: "you've got to move with the times. Since I met Laura

I've been a hand-crafted toy designer, not a, an –” he looked around at the other occupants of the bar and shuddered, guiltily.

“Anorak?” I asked, trying to keep my tone of voice neutral.

“Furry toys.” He glared at his glass but refrained from taking another mouthful. “That's where the action is, not mainframes or steam engines or wearables or MEMS or assemblers. They're all obsolete as soon as they come off the fab: but children will always need toys. Walking talking dolls who're fun to be with. I discovered I've got a knack for the instinctual level –” Something small and blue and horribly similar to a hairy smurf was trying to crawl out of one of his breast pockets, closely pursued by a spreading ink-stain.

“So she divorced you? Before or after children?”

“Yes and no, luckily in that order.” He noticed the escaping imp and, with a sigh, unzipped one of the other pockets on his jacket and thrust the little wriggler inside. It meeped incoherently; when he zipped the pocket up it heaved and billowed like a tent in a gale. “Sorry about that; he's an escape artist. Special commission, actually.”

“How long have you been in the toy business?” I prompted, seeking some less hazardous territory.

“Two years before we got married. Six years ago, I think.” Oh gods, he was a brooder. “It was the buried commands that did it. She was the marketing face; we got a lot of bespoke requests for custom deluxe Teletubby sets, life-sized interactive droids, that kind of thing. Peter Platypus and his Pangolin Playmates. I couldn't do one of those and stay sane without implanting at least one buried easter egg; usually a reflex dialogue, preferably a suite of subversive memes. Like the Barney who was all sweetness and light and I-love-you-you-love-me until he saw a My Little Pony: then he got hungry and remembered his velociraptor roots.”

“I suppose there were a lot of upset little girls –”

“Hell, no! But one of the parental investment units got pissed enough to sue; those plastic horsies are expensive collectors' items these days.”

“Do you still get much work?” I asked.

“Yes.” He downed his glass in one: “you'd be amazed how many orcs the average gamer gets through. And there's always a market for a custom one. Here's Dean –” The wriggling in his pocket had stopped: it looked rather empty. “Excuse me a moment,” he said, and went down on hands and knees beneath the table, in search of the escape artist.

<< EDITORIAL >>

Hand-crafted toys are probably the last domain of specialist human programmers these days. You can trust a familiar with most things, but children are pretty sensitive and familiars are generally response-tuned to adult company. Toys are a special case: their simple reflex sets and behaviours make them amenable to human programmers – children don't mind, indeed need, a lot of repetition and simple behaviour they can understand – while human programmers are needed because humans are still better than familiars at raising human infants. But someone who makes only nasty, abusive, or downright rude toys is –

>> EDITORIAL <<

Later, while my luggage sniffed out a usefully plumbed corner and grew me a suite, I wandered around the hardware show.

Hardware shows at a big con are always fascinating to the true geek, and this one was no exception. Original PCs weren't common at Toast-9, being too commonplace to be worth bringing along, but the weird and wonderful was here in profusion. In the centre of the room was an octagonal pillar surrounded by a cracked vinyl love seat: an original Cray supercomputer from the 1980s in NSA institutional blue. Over in that corner, that rarest and most exotic of beasts, an Altair 1 motherboard, its tarnished copper circuit tracks thrusting purposefully between black, insectoidal microprocessor and archaic hex keypad (the whole thing mounted carefully under a diamond display case, watchful guardian daemons standing to either side in case any enthusiasts tried to get too close to the ancient work of art).

I strolled round the hall slowly, lingering over the ancient mainframes: starting with the working Difference Engine and the IBM 1604 console, then the Pentium II laptop. All of them were pre-software processors: discrete industrial machines from back before the prêt-à-porter brigade acquired personal area networks and turned electronics into a fashion statement. Back when processor power doubled every 18 months and bandwidth doubled every 12 months, back before they'd been overtaken by newer, faster-evolving technologies.

I was examining a particularly fine late-model SPARCstation when somebody goosed me from behind. Strangers don't usually sneak up on me for a quick grope – more's the pity – so when I peeled myself off the ceiling and turned round I wasn't too surprised to see Lynda grinning at me ghoulishly. “Richard!” she said, “I knew you'd be around here somewhere! How's tricks?”

“Much the same. Yourself?”

“Still with the old firm.” The old firm – Intangible Business Mechanisms, as they call themselves today – is a big employer of witches, and Lynda is a particularly fine exponent of the profession, having combined teaching at MIT and practice as a freelance consultant for years. Another of those child prodigies who seem attracted to new paradigms like flies to dog-shit. (I should add: Lynda isn't her real name. Serial numbers filed off, as they say, to protect the innocent.) “Just taking in a little of the local colour, dear. It's so classical! All these hardwired circuits and little lumps of lithographed silicon-germanium semiconductor. Can you believe people once relied on such crude technologies?”

“Tactless,” I hissed at her: an offended anorak-wearer was glaring from beside the Altair-1. “And the answer is yes, anyway. But it was all before you time, wasn't it?”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that,” she said; “I had a laptop too, when I was a baby. But by the time I was in my teens it was all so boring, dinosaur-sized multinationals being starved to death by the free software crowd and trying to drown them in a sea of press releases and standards initiatives, to a greek chorus singing laments about Moore's Law only giving room for another five years of improvements in microprocessor design before they finally ran up against the quantum limits of miniaturization. I remember when House of Versace released their first wearable collection, and there was me a 16-

year-old goth with more CPU power in her earrings than IBM sold in the 1990s and it was boring. The revolution had eaten its own sense of wonder and shat out megacorporations. Would you believe it?" She blinked, and wobbled a little, as if drunk on words. I think her thesaurus was running at too high a priority level.

I surreptitiously looked at her feet: she was wearing heavy black boots, the preferred thinking environment of the security-minded. (Steel toe caps make for great Faraday cages.) Then I eyeballed her up and down: judging by the conservative business suit she had deteriorated a lot in the past year, to the point where she needed corporate memo support. When I first met Lynda, she'd been wearing a fortune in home-made RISC processors bound together by black lacy tatters of goth finery, cracking badly-secured ten-year-old financial transactions every few milliseconds. (And selling any numbered offshore accounts she detected to the IRS for a thief-taker's cut, in order to subsidize her nanoassembler design start-up.) Now she was wearing Armani.

<< EDITORIAL >>

A business suit is a future-shock exoskeleton, whispering reminders in its wearer's ears to prompt them through the everyday niceties of a life washed into bleeding monochrome by the flood of information they live under. Corporate workers and consultants today – I gather this, because I dropped out of that cycle a few years ago, unable to keep up with a new technological revolution every six months – live on the bleeding edge of autism: so wrapped up in their work that if their underwear didn't tell them when to go to the toilet their bladders would burst. And it's not just the company types who need the thinking environment: geeks became dependent on low-maintenance clothing years before, and it's partly thanks to their efforts that the clothing became sentient (if not fully independent).

Clothes today say far more about someone's corporate and social status than they did in the 20th century: we can blame the Media Lab for that, with their radical (not to say annoying) idea that your clothes should think for you. A conservative business suit by a discreet softwear company screams PHB groupware; sneakers and a sloganengineering t-shirt or combat pants go with the Freeware crowd, anarchoid linuxers and hackers, some of them charging a thousand bucks an hour for their commercial services. A 1980s yuppie would have been astonished at the number of body-piercings in the boardrooms, the vacant, glassy stares of brain-webbed executives being steered round the local delicatessen by their necktie while their suit jacket engineered a hostile takeover in Ulan Bator and their shoes tracked stock prices. But then, an 80s yuppie would be a living fossil in this day and age, slow and cold-blooded and not sufficiently intelligent to breathe and do business simultaneously. O brave new world, to have such cyborgs in it.

>> EDITORIAL <<

We arrived back in the bar. "I think I need a drink," said Lynda, wobbling on her feet. "Oops! So sorry. Er, yes. This is so slow, Richard! How do you handle the boredom?"

"Excuse me?" The bartender handed me another Jolt, this one nicely chilled. A large margarita slid across the

bar top and somehow appeared in her hand.

"This!" She looked around vaguely. "Real time!"

I stared at her. Her pupils were wide. "Are you on anything I should know about?" I asked.

"Sensory deprivation. My suit's powered down." She shook her head. "I feel naked. I haven't been offline in months; there are things happening that I don't know about. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now I'm not sure. Is it always like this?"

"How long have you been down?" I asked.

"I'm unsure. Since I saw you in the show? I wanted to get into your headspace and see what it was like, but it's so cramped! Maybe half an hour; it's a disciplinary offence, you know?"

"What, going offline?"

Her eyeballs flickered from side to side in the characteristic jitter of information-withdrawal nystagmus. "Being obsolete."

I left Lynda in the safe custody of a hotel paramedic, who didn't seem to think there'd be any permanent side-effects once her clothing had rebooted. I headed back to the con, fervently glad that I'd stepped off the treadmill a couple of releases after Ashley, way before things got this bad.

<< EDITORIAL >>

Information withdrawal is an occupational hazard for the well-connected, like diabetic hypoglycaemia; if the diabetic doesn't get their sugar hit, or the executive their info-burn, they get woozy and stop working. On the other hand, you can only take it for so long...

Lynda is 26. At 16, she was cracking financial cryptosystems. At 17, she was designing nanotech assemblers. At 20 she was a professor, with a patent portfolio worth millions. Today she's an executive vice-president with a budget measured in the billions. She will be burned out completely by 30, out of rehab by 32 (give or take a case of tardive dyskinesia), with a gold-plated pension and the rest of her life ahead of her – just like the rest of us proto-transhumanists, washed up on the evolutionary beach.

>> EDITORIAL <<

Back in the con proper, I decided to take in a couple of talks. There's a long and sometimes contradictory series of lectures and workshops at any Toast gathering; not to mention the speakers' corners, where any crank can set up a soap-box and have their say.

First I sat through a rather odd monologue with only three other attendees (one of them deeply asleep in the front row): a construct shaped like a cross between a coat-rack and a preying mantis was vigorously attacking the conceit of human consciousness, attempting to prove (by way of an updated version of Searle's Chinese Room attack, lightly seasoned *à la* Penrose) that dumb neurons can't possibly be intelligent in the same way as a, well, whatever the thing on the podium was. It was almost certainly a prank, given our proximity to MIT (not to mention the Gates Trust-endowed Department of Amplified Intelligence at Harvard), but it was still absorbing to listen to its endless spew of rolling, inspired oratory. Eventually the construct argued itself into a solipsistic corner, then asked the floor for questions: when nobody asked any it stormed off in a huff.

I must confess that I was half-asleep by the time the robot philosopher denounced us as non-sapient automata, sparing only half my left eye to speed-read Minsky's *Society of Mind* for clues; in any event, I woke up in time for the next talk, a panel discussion. Someone had rounded up an original stalwart of the Free Software Foundation, to talk about the rise and demise of Microsoft. There was, of course, a Microsoft spokessdroid present to defend the company's historic record. It started with the obligatory three-minute AV presentation about how Our Great Leader and Teacher (Bill) had Saved the World from IBM, but before they could open their mouth and actually say anything Bill's head appeared on screen and the audience went wild: it was like the Three Minute Hate in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

(I used to use the man's software like everyone else, but after the debacle of Windows NT 6.2, and the ensuing Grand Jury investigation and lynchings, well –)

After the Microsoft talk I went back to my temporary apartment to estivate for a few hours. At my age, I need all the regeneration time I can get, even if I have to take it hanging upside down in a brightly-coloured cocoon woven to the side of a tower block's support column. I run some quackware from India that claims to be a white-box clone of the Kaiser-Glaxo program the Pope uses; my tent and travel-equipment designs come courtesy of the Free Hardware Foundation. Having lost my main income stream years ago due to the usual causes, principally cumulative future shock and the let-down from the Y2K consultancy business, I'd be lost without the copylefted design schemata to feed to my assembler farm: I certainly can't afford the latest commercial designs for anything much more exotic than a fountain pen. But life on a 20-century income is still tolerable these days, thanks to the FHF. More about those angels in birkenstocks later, if I can be bothered to write it.

I awoke feeling refreshed and came down from my cocoon to find a new wardrobe waiting for me. I'd got my tent to run up conservative geek-chic before my nap – urban camo trousers, nine-inch nails T-shirt, combat boots, and a vest-of-pockets containing numerous artefacts – and it whispered to me reassuringly as I pulled it on, mentioning that the fuel cell in my left hip pocket was good for 30 hours of warmth and power if I had to venture out into the minus-ten wind chill of a Boston winter. I pumped my heels, then desisted, feeling silly: in this day of barely-visible turbogenerators, heel power makes about as much sense as a slide rule.

Outside my spacious dome tent, the floor of the hotel had sprouted a many-coloured mushroom forest. Luggage and more obscure personal servants scurried about, seeing to their human owners' requirements. Flying things buzzed back and forth like insects with vectored-thrust turbojets. A McDonald's stall had opened up at the far side of the hall and was burning blocks of hashish to make the neighbours hungry; my vest discreetly reminded me that I had some noseplugs.

I had been asleep for three hours. While I had been asleep, Malaysian scientists had announced the discovery of an earth-sized planet with an oxidizing atmosphere less than 40 light-years away: the Gates Trust, in their eternal pursuit of favourable propaganda, had announced that they were going to send a Starwhisp to colonize it.

<< EDITORIAL >>

Insert snide comment about clones, eyes of needles, possibility of passage through, at this juncture: the whole point of a starwhisp is that it's too small to carry any cargo much bigger than a bacillus. Probably the GT was just trying to tweak the American public's guilt complex over the break-up of NASA.

>> EDITORIAL <<

The Pope had reversed her ruling of last week on personality uploads, but reasserted the indivisibility of the soul, much to the confusion of theologians and neuroscientists alike.

There had been riots in Afghanistan over the forcible withdrawal of the Playboy Channel by the country's current ruling clique of backwoods militiamen. (Ditto Zimbabwe and Arkansas.)

Further confirmation of the existence of the sixth, so-called graviteweak resonance force, had been obtained by a team of posthumans somewhere in high orbit. The significance of this discovery was massive, but immediate impact remained obscure – no technological spinoffs were predicted in the next few weeks.

Nobody I knew had died, or been born, or undergone major life-revising events. I found this absence of change obscurely comforting: a worrying sign, so I punched up a really sharp dose of the latest cognitive enhancer and tried to drag my aging (not to say reeling) brain back into the hot core of future-surfing that is the only context in which the antiquities of the silicon era (or modern everyday life, for that matter) can be decoded.

I got out into the exhibition hall only to discover that there was a costume show and disco scheduled for the rest of the night. This didn't exactly fascinate me, but I went along and stared anyway while catching up on the past few hours' news. The costume show was impressive – lots of fabric, and all of it dumb. They had realistic 70s hackers, 80s Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, 90s venture capitalists, and 00s resurrection men, complete with some bits of equipment too precious to put on public exhibition – things like priceless early wearable computer demos from the Media Lab, on loan for the evening: all badly-glued velcro, cellphone battery compartments run up on a glue-gun renderer, and flickering monochrome head-up displays. Towards the end one of the models shambled on stage in a recent (three-month-old, hence barely obsolete) space suit: a closed-circuit life-support system capable of protecting its owner from any kind of hostile environment and recycling their waste for months or years. It probably qualified as an engineering miracle (closed-circuit life support is hard) but it left me with a lingering impression that a major cause of death among its users would be secondary consequences of sexual frustration.

The disco was, well, a disco. Or a rave. Or a waltz. These things don't change: people dress up, eat, take intoxicants, and throw themselves around to music. Same old same old. I settled down with the drinks and the old crusties in the bar, intent on getting thoroughly wasted and exchanging tall stories with the other fogies.

About four or five drinks later, an advertisement crawled through my spam filter and started spraying hotly luminous colours across my left retina. I was busy swapping yarns with an old Cobol monkey called Solip-

sist Nation and I didn't notice it at first. "Is something wrong, my friend?" he asked.

"S'spam. Nothing," I said.

Solly pulled out a huge old revolver – a Colt, I think – and looked around. Squinting, he pointed it at the floor and pulled the trigger. There was no bang, but a cloud of smoke squirted out and settled rapidly to the ground, clustering densely around a small bug-like object. The visuals stopped.

"It's nothing now," he agreed, putting his gun away. "There was a time when things were different."

"When they didn't hide behind microbots. Just hijacked mail servers."

He grinned, disquietingly. "Then they went away."

I nodded. "Let's drink a toast. To whatever made the mail spammers go away."

He raised his glass with me, but I didn't see him drink.

<< EDITORIAL >>

Something the junk advertisers don't seem to understand: we live in an information-supersaturated world. If I don't want to buy something, no amount of shouting or propagandizing will budge me; all it will do is get me annoyed. On the other hand, if I have a need for your product, I can seek it out in an eyeblink.

>> EDITORIAL <<

We now return you to your regular scheduled programming...

There was an art show. Fractals blossomed in intricate, fragile beauty on wall-sized screens of fabulously expensive liquid crystal, driven by the entropy-generating logic-chopping of discrete microprocessors. You could borrow some contact lenses and slip between two wall-sized panels and you're on Europa's seabed, grey ooze and timelessness shared with the moluscoids clustered around the hydrothermal vents. Endless tape loops played cheesy Intel adverts from the tail-end of the 20th, human chip-fab workers in clean-room suits boogying or rocking to some ancient synthesizer beat. A performance-art group, the Anderoids, identically dressed in blue three-piece suits, hung around accosting visitors with annoyingly impenetrable PHB marketroid jargon in an apparent attempt to get them to buy some proprietary but horizontally-scalable vertical-market mission-critical business solution. The subculture of the nerd was omnipresent: an attack of the 50-foot Dilbert loomed over walls, partitions and cubicle hell, glasses smudged and necktie perpetually upturned in a quizzical fin-de-siècle loop.

I took in some more of the panels. Grizzled hackers chewed over the ancient jousts of Silicon Valley in interminable detail: Apple versus IBM, IBM versus DEC, RISC versus CISC/SIMD, Sun versus Intel. I've heard it all before and it's comforting for all its boring familiarity: dead fights, exhumed by retired generals and re-fought across tabletop boards without the need for any deaths or downsizings.

There was an alternate-history panel, too. Someone came up with a beauty; a one-line change in the 1971 anti-trust ruling against AT&T that leaves them the right to sell software. UNIX dead by 1978, strangled by expensive licences and no source code for universities; C and C++ non-starters: the future as VMS. Another

change left me shaking my head: five miles per hour on a cross-wind. Gary Kildall didn't go flying that crucial day, was at the office when IBM came calling in 1982 and sold them CP/M for their PCs. By Y2K Microsoft had a reputation for technical excellence, selling their commercial UNIX-95 system as a high-end server system. (In this one, Bill Gates still lives in the USA.) What startled me most was the inconsequentiality of these points of departure: trillion-dollar industries that grew from a sentence or a breeze in the space of 20 years.

<< EDITORIAL >>

This is the season of nerds, the flat tail at the end of the sigmoid curve. Some time in the 1940s the steam locomotive peaked; great 400-ton twin-engined monsters burning heavy fuel oil, pulling miles-long train sets that weighed as much as freight ships. Twenty years later, the last of these great workhorses were toys for boys who'd grown up with cinders and steam in their eyes. Some time in the 2010s the microprocessor peaked: 20 years later our magi and witches invoke self-programming daemons that constantly enhance their own power, sucking vacuum energy from the vasty deeps, while the last supercomputers draw fractals for the amusement of grey-haired kids who had sand kicked in their eyes. Some time in the 2020s nanotechnology began the long burn up the curve: the nostalgics who play with their grey goo haven't been decanted from their placentories yet, and the field is still hot and crackling with the buzz of new ideas. It's a cold heat that burns as it expands your mind, and I find less and less inclination to subject myself to it these days. I'm in my 70s; I used to work with computers for real before I lost touch with the bleeding edge and slipped into fandom, back when civilization ran on bits and bytes and the machineries of industry needed a human touch at the mouse.

>> EDITORIAL <<

Eventually I returned to the bar. Ashley was still more or less where I'd left him the day before, slumped half-under a table with his ankles plugged into something that looked like a claymation filing cabinet. He waved as I went past, so after I picked up my drink at the bar I joined him. "How're you feeling today?"

"Been worse," he said cheerfully. Three or four empty bottles stood in front of him. "Couldn't fetch me one, could you? I'm on the Kriek geuse."

I glanced under the table. "Uh, okay."

I took another look under the table as I handed him the bottle. The multicoloured cuboid had engulfed his legs to ankle-height before; now it was sending pseudopods up towards his knees. "Your health. Seen much of the show?"

"Naah." He raised the bottle to me, then drank from the neck. "I'm busy here."

"Doing what, if I can ask?"

"I've decided to emigrate to Tau Ceti." He gestured under the table. "So I'm mind-mapping."

"Mind-map –" I blinked. *I do not think that word means what I think it means* drifted through my head. "What for?"

He sighed. "I'm sick of dolls, Richard. I need a change, but I'm not as flexible as I used to be. What do you

think I'm doing?"

I spared a glance under the table again. The thing was definitely getting larger, creeping up to his knees. "Don't be silly," I said. "You don't need to do this, do you?"

"Afraid I do." He drank some more beer. "Don't worry, I've been thinking about it for a long time. I'm not a spring chicken, you know. And it's not as if I'll be dead, or even much different. Just smarter, more flexible. More me, the way I was. Able to work on the cutting edge."

"The cutting edge is not amenable to humans, Ash. Even the weakly superhuman can't keep up any more."

He smiled, the ghost of an old devil-may-care grin. "So I won't be weakly superhuman, will I?"

I drew my legs back, away from the Moravec larva below the table. It was eating him slowly, converting his entire nervous system into a simulation map inside whatever passed for its sensorium: when it finished it would pupate, and something that wasn't Ashley any more would hatch. Something which maintained conscious continuity with the half-drunked idiot sitting in front of me, but that resembled him the way a 70-year-old professor resembles a baby.

"Did you tell your ex-wife?" I asked.

He flinched slightly. "She can't hurt me any more." I shook my head. "Another drink?" he asked.

"Just one for the road," I said gently. He nodded and snapped his fingers for the bar. I made sure the drink lasted: I had a feeling this was the last time I'd see him, continuity of consciousness or no.

<< EDITORIAL >>

And that, dear reader, is why I'm writing this con report. The *Your Antiques!* audience want to know all about the history of Cray Y-MP-48 s/n 4002, hi-res walkthroughs and a sidebar describing the life and death of old man Seymour. All of which is, well, train-spotting. And you can't learn the soul of an old machine by counting serial numbers; for that, you have to stand on the footplate, squinting into the wind of its passage and shovelling coal into the furnace, feel the rush of its inexorable progress up the accelerating curve of history. In this day and age, if you want to learn what the buzz of the computer industry was like you'd have to stop being human. Transcendence is an occupational hazard, the cliff at the edge of the singularity; try climbing too fast and you'll fall over, stop being yourself. It's a big improvement over suicide, but it's still not something I'd welcome just now, and certainly not as casually as Ashley took to it. Eventually it will catch up with me, too, and I'll have to stop being human: but I like my childhood, thank you very much, and the idea of becoming part of some vast, cool intelligence working the quantum foam at the bottom of the M-theory soup still lies around the final bend of my track.

>> EDITORIAL <<

Charles Stross's last two stories here were "Ship of Fools" (issue 98) and "Dechlorinating the Moderator" (issue 105). Originally from Leeds, he lives and works in Edinburgh.

THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE

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THE SKY IS APPALLING

So, have you bought your asteroid-impact insurance yet?

I mean, though occasionally featured in science-fiction novels (Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *Lucifer's Hammer*, Gregory Benford and William Rotsler's *Shiva Descending*, Arthur C. Clarke's *The Hammer of God*), the recent flurry of films, news reports and documentaries suggests that we should expect the event to occur in a matter of years, if not weeks or days. Last March, a few astronomers made the electrifying announcement that a roving asteroid was going to come *within 30,000 miles* of Earth in the year 2002. However, even as television news directors pondered which title to employ for their special coverage of the impending catastrophe ("Death from the Sky"? "Disasteroid?"), other astronomers recalculated the orbit and quickly declared that the object would really come only within 600,000 miles of Earth — though we were warned that this was "still a near-miss, by astronomical standards."

While that particular fear has subsided, asteroids and comets will remain highly visible in 1998, with two major films about calamitous collisions, *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, following on the heels of two television movies and innumerable documentaries with computer-generated images of gigantic objects crashing into the Earth and unleashing firestorms, darkening clouds of debris and devastating tidal waves. And this steady stream of ominous warnings is having an effect: some time ago, after my son Jeremy watched one of these documentaries, he had trouble sleeping that night, worried about a big rock falling from the sky and hitting our house.

Coincidentally, this all reminds me of a story that I often heard as a child: "Chicken Little," about some silly animals running around screaming "The sky is falling!" and working themselves into a panic for no reason.

Shall we consider the true dimensions of the horrifying threat recently presented to us? The earth has a diameter of about 8,000 miles. On a piece of paper, draw a small circle with a one-inch diameter to represent the earth. Measure a distance of four inches from the circumference of the circle; at that point, draw the tiniest little dot you can possibly draw. Now you have a scale diagram of the posited close encounter that briefly panicked the world.

Are you terrified yet?

or,
go to bed,
Jeremy,
an asteroid
isn't going
to land on
our house
tonight

Gary Westfahl

Next, to represent where this object will actually be in 2002, place your paper on the floor, measure about two yards away from the circle, and place your tiniest dot there. That's a scale drawing of a "near-miss, by astronomical standards" — which is, as some may not realize, analogous to saying that a million years is "a short time, by geological standards."

Well, if that one asteroid will, by some remarkable luck, avoid a ruinous rendezvous with the Earth, what about the thousands of other known and predicted "Earth-orbit-crossing" asteroids and comets out there? Even ignoring the fact that most of these objects have very eccentric orbits that only rarely bring them anywhere near Earth's orbit, we must recall that Earth's orbit is about 300,000,000 million miles long, and Earth's diameter is 8,000 miles, so the odds of an impact would seem comfortably minuscule.

Lacking proper credentials, though, I will defer to expert testimony regarding the actual odds of a devastating celestial visitor. One astronomer interviewed for a sleazy, sensational documentary entitled *Impact: Could It Happen?* interrupted his familiar doomsday rhetoric to mention in passing that, of course, the odds of a really

large asteroid hitting the Earth, causing cataclysmic destruction and mass extinctions, were about one hundred million to one.

Stop. Rewind. Replay. *One hundred million to one?* These are the odds that we are panicking about?

Anyone familiar with statistics understands that when the odds of something happening are one hundred million to one, you have nothing to worry about. It simply isn't going to happen, at least in your lifetime or your grandchildren's lifetime. And the people involved in these films, documentaries, and news reports know that very well.

Still, I discern no villains here, and will offer no fiery denunciations of modern-day prophets of doom. Filmmakers are in the business of providing entertainment, and as long as their stories do not incorporate, or do not arrive accompanied by, pious rhetoric about the significance and relevance of their films' messages, they cannot plausibly be charged with misrepresentation or deceit. In less obvious ways, broadcast journalists are also in the entertainment business, limited only by the stipulation that their reports have some slender basis in fact; and, if obsessively focusing on colourful but unlikely cosmic disasters at the expense of other, more meaningful problems does not seem like responsible journalism, we must recognize that, at any given time, "responsible journalism" can be conveniently defined as the sort of journalism that purportedly flourished about 30 years prior to laments about its contemporary absence.

And it's hard to condemn the astronomers who keep testifying on television about the likelihood of these events, even as they knowingly shade the truth in addressing an audience whose understanding of phrases like "it's possible" or "it could happen" is far different than a professional's. It's nice to be noticed; it's fun to appear on television. And astronomers interviewed for documentaries about asteroid impacts know the rules. If they say, "This is all nonsense — there are no killer asteroids heading for Earth," their footage will end up on the cutting-room floor. If they cautiously concede, "It's very, very unlikely, but yes, it might happen," they may earn 30 seconds of air time. And if they ominously intone, "It happened before, and it will happen again — and it could mean the end of life on Earth as we know it," they will be the stars of the show.

I can relate to the desire to appear on television since I have succumbed to it. Devotees of sleazy, sensational documentaries may someday hear a certain has-been actor introducing "Professor Gary Westfahl" to discuss the imminent development of functional time machines. I can honestly say that I was not fully informed about the contents of this documentary, that I was prodded by inane questions, and that my statements were misleadingly edited to remove important qualifying language – but if the producer called me to do the talking-head routine again, I probably would. Alas, appearing on national television is more impressive to family and friends than publishing in *Interzone*.

Rather than indignation, then, watching noted astronomers pontificate on the impending extinction of humanity should inspire a feeling of sadness; for I remember the time when noted astronomers could attract the public's attention without having to tell scary stories to frighten children. That time, evidently, has passed.

Recently, I happened to read a routine 1935 space opera from *Amazing Stories*, Leslie F. Stone's "The Fall of Mercury," filled with humanoid aliens of various sizes and colours befriending or fighting each other. And I recalled that outer space was once depicted as a familiar, even friendly place. The other planets in the Solar System were exotic and sometimes inhospitable, but they were not unlike good old Earth. The sentient beings encountered there may have been larger or smaller, or may have resembled some terrestrial animal (like "Lizard Men from Pluto"), but they otherwise looked and acted like us to a remarkable extent. This was the space of Percival Lowell's Mars and Edgar Rice Burroughs's Barsoom – a Solar System that represented a picturesque new venue for re-enactments of inspiring sagas of the past, a new frontier for America to conquer, a new empire for Great Britain to forge. And it was a craving for this outer space that animated the science-fiction writers who dreamed about space exploration and the scientists who made it happen; think of young Carl Sagan, gazing up at the stars, yearning that he too, like Burroughs's John Carter, could be instantly teleported to Barsoom.

Well, a century of research has persuasively demonstrated that this vision of space was only a fantasy. Except for Earth, there is no place in the Solar System where a human can survive for an instant without a bulky spacesuit; and, except perhaps for a few micro-organisms buried in the Martian soil, or some fishlike creatures in the icy oceans of Europa, there aren't any signs of life either. The young Sagan who longed for Barsoom lamentably became the old Sagan obliged to gibber excitedly

about evidence suggesting the possible existence of planets that might engender life. Scientists who once hoped to see sentient Martians could now only study *Pathfinder* pictures of Martian rocks that were playfully named for popular cartoon characters like Yogi Bear and Boo Boo in a gesture both poignant and stupid.

And, despite the sounds of excitement in the scientists' voices, the public has not failed to notice that the real outer space seems much less interesting, and much less attractive, than the phony outer space once featured in popular science and science fiction. Let's face it: compared to a Martian, a Martian rock is boring, and calling it Yogi Bear doesn't help. No bizarre aliens, no landscapes of virgin land for farms or settlements, not much of anything at all except for rocks, vacuum, and freezing cold – who can be surprised that public interest in space exploration is at an all-time low?

As it happens, I personally find the austere beauty of the actual Solar System more interesting and attractive than the plastic playgrounds of space operas, and a documentary filled with photographs and computer graphics of its many wonders will always draw my attention. But this isn't exactly what Lowell, Burroughs and Stone promised, is it? And this isn't the sort of spectacle that is likely to attract widespread public admiration and support.

And so, when we see astronomical dramas and documentaries increasingly focus on the implausible scenario of a huge comet or asteroid striking the Earth, we confront an unpleasant truth: today, the only way you can get people interested in space is to tell them that a big chunk of it is about to fall in their backyards.

Now, I am not *entirely* dismissive of the dangers of debris from the sky. I approve of the sorts of modest steps long advocated by Clarke, and now underway, to thoroughly examine nearby space to locate and track every object that approaches our planet, though I support this work more because of the increased scientific knowledge we will incidentally gain than because of any genuine anxiety that an emissary of doom will be observed heading straight for Earth. However, every new film and report on this topic does fill me with fear – though not of a wayward asteroid.

This is the scenario that frightens me: suppose a comet or asteroid is detected that will come perilously close to Earth – perhaps, within 30,000 miles. Preconditioned to panic by years of bad movies and dubious documentaries, and ignoring the astronomers who note the chances of collision are extraordinarily small, the American government decides to eliminate the threat by improvising a space mission, led by an heroic astro-

naut resembling Robert Duvall or Bruce Willis, to rendezvous with and either destroy or deflect the invader. And this mission disastrously fails, either splitting the object into several smaller objects – a few of which strike the Earth – or deflecting the asteroid in the direction of, say, New York City.

The problem is, cosmic billiards is a lot more difficult than the tabletop variety. Suppose you have an approaching asteroid shaped like a big, lumpy peanut, of unknown composition and density, rotating head over heel at a 25-degree angle to its axis of rotation; now, if you want to change its course in a certain way, exactly where do you plant the bomb, and when do you set it off? Put a team of physicists to work on the problem, and you'll still get an answer which begins, "Our best guess is..." For now, I'll take my chances with the way nature runs the Solar System; I get nervous at the thought of human beings taking the controls.

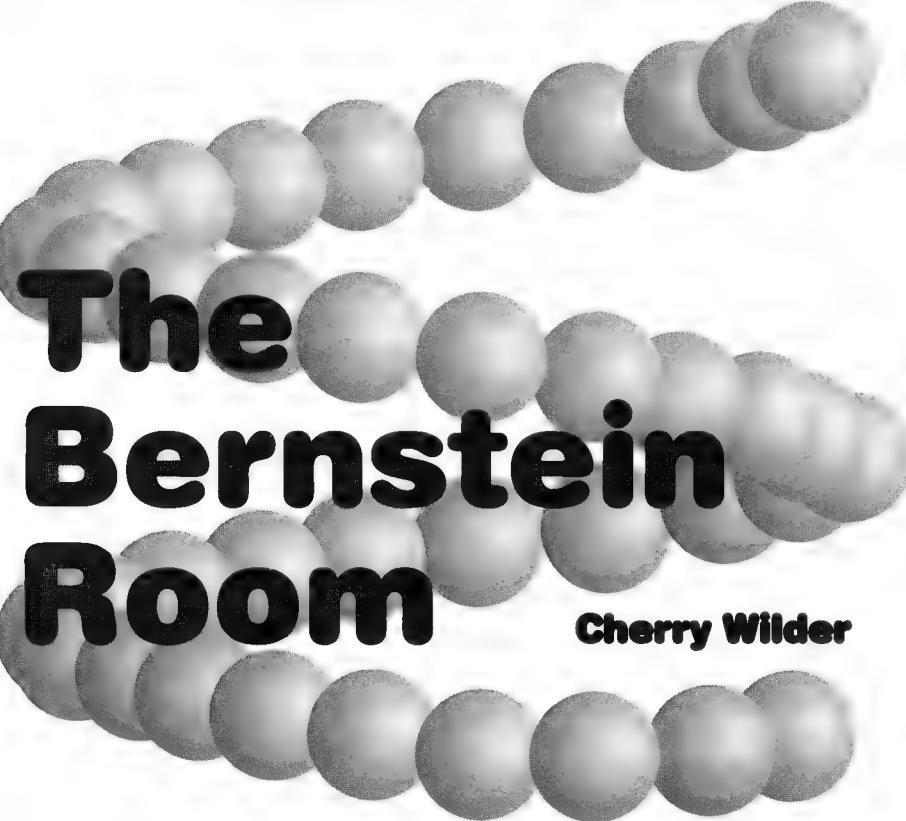
Even this, however, is a minor fear, compared to the genuine dangers that humanity currently faces. During the week I drafted this column, there were two starkly contrasting news events. First, NASA revealed that it was hard at work devising procedures for informing the world about impending asteroid collisions – an activity that seems just as vital as drafting protocols for meetings with alien visitors. (How should we address the first alien who steps out of the flying saucer? "Distinguished Emissary from Space"? "Your Exalted Alienness"?") Second, India exploded three atomic bombs as part of an accelerated programme to build a nuclear arsenal, which inspired its neighbour Pakistan to announce its own plans for atomic weapons. So, for the first time in history, two nations which hate each other, share a common border, and have fought three wars will both be armed with nuclear weapons. Factor in the data that India is historically an ally of Russia, and Pakistan is historically an ally of the United States – the nations that lead the world in nuclear armaments – and it's clear that the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* needs to move its doomsday clock a bit closer to midnight again.

A possible nuclear war worries me much more than the slim prospect of an asteroid hitting the Earth.

And one cannot forget the ongoing threats of nuclear proliferation elsewhere in the world, the development and stockpiling of biological and chemical weapons, and eventually ruinous environmental changes due to massive deforestation, ozone-layer depletion, and global warming – among other things.

In sum, it's foolish to worry about cosmic murder when the gravest danger facing humanity has been, and continues to be, suicide.

Gary Westfahl



The Bernstein Room

Cherry Wilder

We needed a new environment for the summer exhibition. The old walk-through, "Borderlines," was looking shabby: dusty black drapes, black cardboard curling up at the edges, a smell of overheated dust. Light bulbs kept popping and the *Schlagbaum*, the striped barrier, left red stains on the hands. The pictures still packed a wallop; I used to slip in to see the wallfall clips and the fireworks. Kurt and Maja, who did the videos, developed a spin-off that we ran downstairs: two reels which showed people hauling down monumental statues.

They had found good stuff everywhere. No sooner had one set a date limit, say, 20th century, then there was a shot from a film on the French Revolution or a still from Mexico. Down they came: Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm, Peter the Great, August the Strong, Franz Josef, Czars various, Generals in South America, Hitler, Mussolini, King George V, Trotsky, Stalin, Mombassa, Idi Amin, General Custer, Marx, Engels, Walter Ulbricht, Lenin, that chap, whatever his name was, who founded the KGB and lasted, in stone, until the Putsch in '91.

The show was very popular and a boon when it came to groups of teenagers who hadn't wanted to visit an art gallery anyway. They sat around with the channel changer cheering as the huge heads rolled and the monsters bit the dust.

But, as I say, "Borderlines" was ready to be scrapped; Kurt and Maja were away in New York. We had a fair amount of time to develop a new concept and Fabius sent me to a new man, a junk wizard, a prop-maker, who infested an old hangar near Zeppelinheim. Holger, who is something between an apprentice and a Man Friday, drove me over in the van.

It was a fine day in February, one of those days, in Hessen, when you believe that spring will come. Holger, a big fair boy with a speech problem dating back to his escape from Dresden in the boot of a Skoda, played

country and western cassettes.

"Take it easy, Paula..." he whispered. "This is supposed to be a great place."

He thinks I should loosen up, that I am too business-oriented and likely to frighten artists. The hangar had a painted sign like an inn: TRADE WINDS was lettered on the sail of a Chinese junk. We drove right inside the hangar. Dusty shafts of sunlight came slanting down and there were old aeroplane ghosts flying overhead, along with box kites and carnival dragons. Down below was the mad bazaar: a dozen roomy bays with costumes, toys, furniture, weaponry, cubicles devoted to chaos, with Mandelbrot all over the walls and ceilings... Trade Winds was hard to resist.

Holger and I wandered through and became involved in a misunderstanding. A photographer came poltering through the golden gloom and cried:

"No! No! No! I'm sorry, my dearest, but I distinctly told the agency woman blonde and required for a figurehead shot..."

He was harassed, with an unpleasant sunlamp tan; he was a little too old for his leisure suit. A downtrodden woman with a clipboard announced him as Mr Denis.

"There must be some mistake," I said.

He twirled a finger, pouting thoughtfully.

"Turn around!" he said. "The hair is natural. I suppose that agency woman had something in mind..."

Holger began a whispery attempt to straighten things out — Frau Kim was not a model, not sent by an agency... I had already told modish Mr Denis to go twirl his finger somewhere else. As he reeled back and sounded off about an *Unverschämtheit*, a shameless piece of impudence, the Wizard himself came by, grinning and wiping his hands on a roller towel labelled ANDREA DORIA.

He was younger than I had expected: more into mechanic than temperamental artist/designer. A gleam,

perhaps, of Mad Scientist, because his eyes were a hard, bright blue. He handled the contretemps gently, even sleepily, and I found out that he used the name Charley instead of Karl-Heinz. Charley Keller of Trade Winds. Yes of course, we were his visitors from the Fabius Gallery.

He led us into a special bay with drawing boards and more beautiful fantasy junk piled upon the trestle tables. Ostrich feathers, snuff boxes, bolts of satin, skeins of home-dyed wool, a set of bagpipes which gave off a faint groan as I patted the bag. Music was playing, Vivaldi or something. I had the feeling we were being softened up.

"Frau Kim..."

Charley was handing out antique goblets of an amber liquid which turned out to be semi-sweet apple wine.

"Call me Paula," I said.

I was in the midst of a phase in which I had discarded my chosen last name, my mother's name, and used my own given name alone: a *nom-de-guerre*, like Colette or Sting.

"I do variations on historical objects," he said. "It's hard to explain."

There were two big folders showing his environments: one from the Biennial in Venice, the other from the Documenta, the big show up in Kassel. The Venice environment was called "Sea Dreams" and it was very beautiful, packed with clichés: fishing nets, drifts of sand, shells, pearls, treasure chests and sailors' bones. It was redeemed by the big "galleon" rostrum and by the quality of the light, a lot of drifting turquoise light which altered in streams of air coming up from below, moving the seaweed forests of oiled paper and synthetic hair. Music? Whale songs. "Flying Dutchman" run through the synthesizer. Venetian sea chanties.

Very impressive. Holger was thrilled, wanted me to respond more, and for politeness sake I let Charley-boy run the video while we looked at the second folder. *Doppelgänger*: an edgy, post-modern thing guaranteed to drive the fans at the Documenta crazy. Two of me, two of you, wherever we turn and not only done with mirrors.

Around the twin trees lurk blow-ups of a convention for twins; wicked stepmother fronts up to fairy godmother, Dr Jekyll turns, slowly, into you-know-who. Cue for song: "Me and My Shadow." The dancers, in silhouette, become one, become four, like cut-out paper dolls. A pudgy-faced fellow with thick dark hair pops up here and there: he changes to a grinning double skull which alters to a shot of baby siamese twins.

"Who is that man?" panted Holger.

I caught Charley's eye and we grinned, like two skulls.

"Mengele," I said.

All this time I had been checking on costs in the design folders and in my dialogue with Charley. It made Holger squirm but my policy was good and the stingy one in the gallery was Great God Fabius, not me. Charley Keller was relaxed about money and never tried to drive a hard bargain with his original works. I turned to the third folder which contained, he said, "the ghost of an idea." There were newspaper clippings, old and new, plus a whole glossy coffee table book and many loose photographs and drawings.

Amber! Bernstein! The gold of the north, petrified

sea-foam that the Romans trundled home from the barbarian lands at the edge of the world. The fossil resin from the *Urwald*, the forest home of the lost gods. Treasures of amber, from perfume bottles to worry-beads, and one especial treasure. The apotheosis of amber some might say...

"The Amber Room?" I whispered.

"Trust me..." begged Charley.

There are no glossy colour spreads of the Amber Room in existence but the makers of the coffee-table book had conjured it up so well that I began to squint. Twenty-two giant amber wall panels, 150 smaller works of art, namely shields, figures, garlands, all made of amber, from palest gold, through middle tonings to rich red, dark honey, translucent maroon. When the sun shone it was like being boiled in marmalade; in the light of many candles it turned the head of an impressionable ruler: Czar Peter the Great.

Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia, whose idea it had been in the first place, who had commissioned the Amber Room, did the only possible thing he could have done. He gave the room to Czar Peter in 1716: it was trundled off to Russia in specially constructed sleds. The total excess of the Czarist court and of the Little Mother of all the Russias herself, suited the Amber Room perfectly. It began to approach art, to float in that area reserved for idols encrusted with jewels, St Theresa pierced by the angel's spear, Dali's dinners, Fabergé easter eggs...

In 1755 it became the *pièce de résistance* of Tsarkoe Selo, new summer palace of Catherine the Great, hard by St Petersburg. It benefited from the style drift: Baroque to Rococo; it benefited from Rastrelli, the Czarsina's architect, who skilfully adapted it to a larger room (among other things by knocking out two more doorways). It became, almost, in certain lights, charming; it remained, always, a jaw-dropper. The colours, the patterns. The trapped insects, the pretty mosaics of Italian country life with which Rastrelli broke up the glowing panels...

"What a fantastic idea!" gasped Holger. "The lost Amber Room! What a knock-out!"

Lost for 50 years. How was it possible? The Amber Room was something, surely, that would never go away, like the Curse of Tutankhamen. But a Nazi Art-Snatch Commando had ripped it cruelly from the walls of the summer palace. Panels and curlicues were packed into those massive chests that were even now haunting the media, and trundled – by rail this time – back towards the Baltic Lands, back into the Thousand Year Reich. It got as far as the ill-fated, ill-documented city of Königsberg, sometimes known as Kalinengrad, bombed heavily by both sides.

Reason seemed to suggest that this was the end of the line for the Amber Room. It melted in the local museum and only some scraps of marble from the mosaics remained in the bubbling mass. On the other hand amber does not melt it burns, and there were persistent rumours that the room had survived. Any year now in some mine-shaft, some ruined castle, some barn or bunker, a ray of sunlight would reveal – dusty chests. When the rumours centred on Thuringia treasure-seekers from east and west rushed into the countryside with shovels and started digging.

"Of course," said Charley Keller. "I'm only marginally interested in these new legends out of the former Communist block."

He altered the music – something symphonic but not baroque – and handed me a new folder. The outlines of the new environment were soft; smooth bubbles of amber curled and clustered everywhere. The light was hard to catch in the line and wash drawings; the music was vaguely operatic. Light operatic?

"*Candide*," said Charley.

"Bernstein!" I said, casting my eyes to heaven.

Holger thought this was the cutest thing he had ever heard: Bernstein playing in the *Bernsteinzimmer*, the Amber Room. Charley led the way into the back of the bay, quickly, secretly, and there were a few of the amber bubbles spread on a work bench. They were firm and smooth, light in weight as real amber but without the grainy texture that gave it character. The synthetic amber was held in frames of light wood and cane; Charlie hovered over his creation protectively.

"New plastic," he said. "Secret process. Don't worry, it's perfectly harmless... feel them, Paula."

The bubbles were pleasant to the touch; some of the larger ones were soft, springy, as if they had not quite set.

"Yes!" I said. "Yes, I love it! We must have it for the Fabius Gallery!"

The Maestro himself swung the New York Symphony Orchestra into *West Side Story*: we titled the new environment in a mixture of languages: "*The Bernstein Room*."

Through the spring, when there was nothing doing except a photographic exhibition which Fabius supervised himself, the new environment grew on the top floor of the main gallery. It was one of the happiest times of my life. The workmen came and went on time; Charley Keller had a magic touch with all of them. He brought in a couple of helpers, including an older man in a grubby white coat, Herr Wieland, who turned out to be a research chemist from some quasi-government agency, the Hermann Muller Institute.

The Fabius Gallery is housed in two large villas, built at the turn of the century, which stand in a green park in a rich suburb of Frankfurt-Am-Main. We're about ten kilometres from the string of museums and galleries on the banks of the river Main. There is a good car park, a very good restaurant, the *Zaoshen*, which offers Cantonese cooking, plus Korean specialties, in honour of my poor Mama...

The top floor of the larger house, the "Villa Astrid," was used for environments: it had been a very spacious attic, surmounted by a square tower, a light-well. We had removed a flagpole and opened this great sky-light again, with modern glass panels. There was plenty of space in the attic for a collection of small rooms-within-a-room, not to mention the electric and electronic wonders we needed. Outside, nestled beside the tower, there was a special satellite dish that had brought worldwide news updates into "Borderlines" and weather reports into "Sturm und Drang," the environment before last. Natural catastrophes – very popular, especially the twisters in Kansas, with clips of Judy Garland in the Land of Oz.

The new environment was a spiral, directing the visitor right, through a well-lit corridor, showing golden autumn woods and, on the other wall, the Baltic coast.

Men were fishing up amber in nets. The light as, one went deeper in, became more golden: the leaves on the autumn trees were sometimes made of synthetic amber. Then there was a curving, half round room, completely covered with the big baroque bubbles of amber in every shade. It proclaimed itself to be "Zeitgeist – homage to the Amber Room."

I had worked on the documentary material with Charley and we had found the right touch: informative, oh sure, but gently satirical. There was the amber room, through television magic, and a short history of its life and times. This included some jolly footage from Hessen Radio/TV, April 1st 1992, claiming that the Amber Room had been found in a cellar in Darmstadt, not far from the local museum. On the other screen there were clips of Catherine the Great: played by Dietrich, Mae West and Hildegard Neff.

There were sofas and chairs in *Zeitgeist*, not too many – the patrons must be encouraged to keep moving. One heard stories of environments with dark corners, erotic film clips, soft floors, where young visitors stayed far too long. So, beckoned by flashing lights and music one went into a narrow, curving, mind-bending space where Lenny Bernstein was giving a master class on one wall in eerie silence and on the other conducting *Carmen Jones*. The amber bubbles lit the floor – there was a feeling of lightness, movement: when Charley first showed it to me, half-complete, I began to dance a tango. He joined in; we kissed for the first time.

The spiral ended again on the sea-shore: there was more Bernstein playing, this was the place for *Candide*. We had some of the newest documentary clips on the whereabouts of the Amber Room including the notion that it had sunk, one way or another, while leaving Königsberg... it had returned to the sea. In the faint amber glow of a thousand small bubbles there was a homage to Leonard Bernstein; he faded out into a sea of faces at a last concert. I had wondered if the effects in this last section might be too trite, too corny. Now I was moved to tears. Charley wiped them away with a paper handkerchief.

"It's the NP plaques," he said. "I've worked with them for a while now and they have a mood effect..."

NP stood for New Plastic; I did not take in the idea of a "mood effect" until I had acted it out right there and then. As we emerged into the bright daylight of the attic Fabius came towards us; he had turned pale.

"Father!" I cried. "What is it? Are you sick?"

I had not spoken to him as a daughter for months – of course everyone knew of the relationship.

"Oh Paula," he said, as we helped him to a chair. "I went into the Bernstein for a moment and had to come out again. It made me sad. I thought of your mother..."

There was coffee and cognac available on the desk; in no time he had become Axel Fabius again, sharp, charming, in control. As we sat there, all three, Fabius, Charley, Paula, I had the strangest feeling that this was how things were going to be... I realized that not only was Charley Keller being exceedingly nice to the old man but that the old man was being exceedingly nice to him. Heavens – he approved! After sneering at every one of my friends/lovers Fabius had found one that might do. I felt a mixture of relief and distrust.

So now the spring had come at last and we had the opening of the new environment in conjunction with the first big show of the year *Big Sky: American Nature Painters*. Georgia O'Keefe, Andrew Wyeth, Grant Wood, to name a few. No, we didn't get *American Gothic*, we hung a collage on it by a "young painters" group called the Ground Hogs, out of Athens, Georgia. The show was very well reviewed and attracted a good following, without being an unseemly smash hit with queues around the block.

The environment, "The Bernstein Room," opened to praise from its target group namely art students, old hippies, retired revolutionaries and their children and grandchildren, history buffs, musicians of every stripe. Charley and I were photographed as an item in the *Frankfurter Journal*. Then slowly but surely something new was added. People began to love the Bernstein room, to become addicted to it. Nobody ever saw it once. A few of the visitors freaked out; no, they didn't become violent, they, well, they saw things.

An old lady that I knew quite well, a regular, Frau Martens, widow of a jazz trumpeter, was brought out in a fainting condition. I took her to my tiny office in the attic and made tea. She recovered at once and apologized. Over Camomile tea and Leibnitz biscuits she confided to me that she had had a vision.

There in the last spiral of the beautiful environment she had seen her husband, Ossie Martens, playing his trumpet on the beach under a palm tree. She knew it was subjective, she said, but it was so fine and powerful that she had been overcome, had sunk down to the ground.

Nina Martens was a person whose honesty I could absolutely trust. I heard other stories, half-told, from the younger viewers, who wouldn't have inspired the same trust, with, say, police or teachers. But I knew they weren't lying: the Bernstein Room was a magic place. I probed a little with my younger pals, from art school, Monika and Bastian. No, for heaven's sake, Paula, they laughed. That's the whole point. The B.R. is beautiful, a trip in itself – you *don't need* drugs when you come in here. No, not even hash or a joint, leave alone cocaine or designer shit. The Bernstein Room *sends you*.

Charley and I talked over this "feel-good effect" in and out of the Bernstein Room, in the hours of the night during which we should have been in bed together. I sensed in him, in my dear love, my beautiful man, something he wanted to confess.

By this time we had made love everywhere. Car, other car, we could hardly wait and did it in the gardens a couple of times. We went to my place, my dear old atelier in the other house, the Villa Artemisia. We went to his place, a modest bungalow hard by the Trade Winds hangar in Zeppelinheim. But the thing that was bothering him was something non-sexual, to do with his work, his art, the gallery... *something*. For once I took my mother's advice – she had coped, after all, with Fabius – and did not push or ask questions.

Besides there was something I was holding back too and I did not know whether it was about the Bernstein Room or about myself. For I had had the strangest experience of all.

Very late one night, in the hottest days of July, I was sitting in my cubbyhole in the attic finishing up some

paperwork and sipping rosehip tea. The lights were still on in the Bernstein Room, which rose up like a large, strange-shaped tent. I had just walked through it myself and a security man would make a final check when I left.

Museums and galleries always have a problem with stowaways or stay-backs. Visitors hide and try to get locked in. Not always with robbery or vandalism in mind – sometimes they have romantic reasons. One of the most notorious girl terrorists, before she turned to the use of explosives, spent a night in the Alhambra Palace with her poet boyfriend.

Now in the night, with the lights still on and the music turned very low, just for my own pleasure, I became aware that there was someone in the Bernstein Room. I looked up at the cameras and saw a misty radiance that obscured the lens first in one part of the environment, then in another. It was certainly not a burglar with a torch. The presence moved erratically from the sea shore, then to the Homage to Bernstein sector, then back to the "historic" Amber Room. I was afraid for a few seconds then I moved into a kind of trance state which was beyond fear.

I thought of ghosts – but whose ghosts? The Czars and Czarinas? The film stars? Lennie Bernstein? Voltaire? At last, ready to set off the alarm, I simply switched off the music. There was a moment of deathly stillness and then a flash of light; I knew that the presence had been removed. My nerve failed completely: I snatched up my things, raced down from the attic, and told the security men on duty to be sure and check the Bernstein Room.

As I walked home across the park through the undark summer night I looked back at the Villa Astrid and saw the misty shafts of light that reached up into the heavens through the open panels of the great skylight. I thought of the persons who had seen angels but angels were not for me; I wondered what my friend Dagmar from Darmstadt would make of it. She had to do with a small private observatory almost in the shadow of the big official tracking station; she and her friends watched patiently for aliens, visitors from other worlds.

The Bernstein Room was our most successful environment ever – all through long, hot June/July we logged more than 6,000 visitors. We had the guests sign a visitors' book, a simple precaution to weed out, say, known druggies, wanted criminals, even prostitutes, poor kids, if they weren't game to sign. There were the usual comics who signed as Mick Jagger or Marlene Dietrich or Johannes Faust: we didn't fuss. We were taking their pictures with a hidden camera in any case.

Minor happenings continued. People saw visions or felt strange or thought they had glimpsed an angel – angels were in that year. One of the most touching incidents was the case of Holger, our own good Holger Steiner, who fell in love – with a man. He met the talented long-haired art student Hank Pederson, from Rotterdam, and a few trips though the Bernstein Room cleared their minds to the point where Holger came out and Hank vowed true love.

The blow fell early in August on a Sunday, always a big day for the gallery; we had just closed at 21.00, 9 p.m. I came back from shutting the main doors, passed the time of night with the Security team in their rooms, and

was glad that this was the start of a short display break. I found Charley in the large office with a visitor. It was his colleague, Erik Wieland, the research chemist from the Hermann Muller Institute. He had cast off his grubby lab coat and was wearing a smart new summer overcoat and carrying an overnight case. He was frightened and at the same time determined, exactly like a man running from his fate.

He and Charley explained in bursts..

"The law has been amended a number of times," panted Herr Wieland, "but this time we have lost. I mean the genetic lobby. I will not accept this – I will not destroy my life's work..."

"Genetic lobby?" I asked warily.

The Herman Muller Institute, named for a German-American biologist who specialized in genetics and mutations, had been developing gene techniques, as used widely in the United States. But fear of the free range tomatoes and altered petunias was much stronger in Germany and the use of gene techniques much more strictly controlled.

A certain research initiative had been forbidden, its products must be scrapped, and Herr Wieland was running away, with a briefcase full of little vials and disks full of notes. He was heading over the green, uncontrolled border into France. He blamed, in part, the machinations of the plastics industry... At last I began to understand.

"Charley?" I said faintly, pointing upwards, to the ceiling, in the direction of the attic, home of New Plastic.

"Oh Paula," he said.

"But it is plastic," I said, "a new plastic... You mixed it up and set it in frames, for the amber plaques..."

"No," he sighed. "I seeded each frame, fed it nutrients, and exposed it to sunlight or its equivalent. The NP is semi-sentient, semi-organic, it is the beginning of a great tissue revolution. Those pieces of amber – *I grew them!*"

So this was the confession he had been working up to. I was sad, apprehensive, aghast; I made coffee and comforted poor Herr Wieland. I spoke of the "mood" effect of the Bernstein Room – could this be real? Could the New Gene Plastic be harmful? He assured me that to the best of his knowledge it could not – he had worked with it for several years and so had Charley in this project of ours.

I told him not to worry, we would work something out and no word of the provenance of the new plastic would be leaked by us. Already I had doubts – so many people had seen the environment, so many folders had been handed out which, naturally, paid tribute to Charley and Trade Winds. I wondered about sensational headlines in the sleazier newspapers.

Charley held me close as he drove off with his poor friend, escorting him to the border, on the other side of the Saarland.

"You're wonderfully strong, Paula," he whispered. "We really will work this out. You were terrific with poor old Wieland!"

I watched the two cars drive away then checked Security before I staggered upstairs to the Bernstein Room. We paid a great deal for Security, with a private firm who specialized in galleries and museums. The exhibits in Nature Painters were world famous and heavily

insured. Our electronic surveillance was first class: potential stowaways or stay-backs didn't have a chance. In the attic I brought up the lights and wandered sadly through the Bernstein Room, our best, our most beautiful Environment. I invoked all the persons within its aura: the Romans, the old Germans, Frederick Wilhelm of Prussia, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, all the actresses who had played her, and Rastrelli, the architect from a warm climate.

I summoned up those poor souls in war-torn Königsberg or Kalinengrad who had last seen the real plaques of the Amber Room. I called on Leonard Bernstein and all his musicians and the actors in his musical shows. I asked for protection – no scandal, no bad thing to harm the people who came to my father's gallery, or to harm my father who had given his life, the old devil, to this work. I gazed up through the light path into the night sky and invoked my own alien, drawn by the magic 'fluence of Charley's homegrown New Gene Plastic.

As I walked back across the park I was more thankful than ever for our summer display break – the Nature Painters were already crated up, bound for Berlin on Tuesday, and the whole gallery was shut for three days. This would surely be some kind of cooling off period if there was a connection made in the press. Fabius was in Berlin himself, to be at the reopening of Nature Painters in a colleague's gallery. I was glad I didn't have to explain about the Bernstein Room being rather vulnerable. I was anxious not to destroy his good opinion of Charley.

In the atelier, my own precious four walls, I slept heavily and dreamed of a long empty street, lined with windowless buildings, something like an Italian surrealist, De Chirico. I strolled along and became afraid of the emptiness – where had all the people gone? Where was Charley? Where was my father? Where was the gallery? Where was my life?

I was awakened by Fabius calling from the Hotel Kempinski in Berlin at five o'clock in the morning. As he raged feebly at the other end I answered the bell way downstairs. The Security chief, Herr Thurnau, thrust in two copies of the notorious *Bild Zeitung*. Reporters in cars and on foot were hanging about the two entrances to the park. I ordered him to hold everyone at bay, especially during the loading of the exhibits for Berlin on the following day. No one was in residence, the gallery was shut down completely for the whole of the week. The security men would receive time and a half.

"Herr Thurnau," I said, "I will have two assistants arriving through the bunker. See that they're not disturbed."

Herakles Security Services were in the know about the secret entrance. I rattled up in the Art Nouveau lift and read the headlines while Axel Fabius demanded feebly.

"Paula, Paula, is it true? Must we sue the vile tabloids? Where is our dear boy, where is Charley to tell me it is all a nonsense? Is the beautiful environment a hot-bed of... of... radiation?"

"Father," I said, "trust me once more. I have never failed you. I will have Charley call you. Our latest environment – you can tell reporters – is closed."

I hung up and called Holger and Hank in their elegant flat two streets away. I read them the headlines. DANGEROUS RADIATION FROM GENETIC

"AMBER," Thousands exposed at fashionable Fabius Gallery, Teenagers See Visions! There were pictures of the environment, of Charley, of Fabius, and of "exotic young dragon-lady of the gallery, Paula Kim-Fabius." Holger was so unsurprised that I wondered if he had heard rumours. But the boys flung themselves into the action without a second thought and arrived in their kombivan in 15 minutes.

The secret entrance to the park led through an underground garage into the cellar of the restaurant complex. It was a bunker from the Second World War which had been filled with looted art treasures. The sort of place, in fact, where one might have stumbled upon those dusty chests holding the real, the historic Amber Room.

It was already daylight as I met the boys at the restaurant and we fled across the dew-wet grass to the Villa Astrid and so on up to the attic and the Bernstein Room. We were challenged twice; Herakles Security was doing a great job for time and a half. We had the chests there ready, taking up the corners of the attic. We packed up the Bernstein Room in three hours, stoked with coffee, cognac and fresh dim sums from poor Herr Soong at the restaurant who was alarmed at the headlines.

We took most particular care to separate out every plaque, every bead and drop of the New Gene Plastic. I held back a few of the larger bubbles but the rest, 143 pieces, went off in chests, along with the scenery, broken up if necessary, plus the screens, the tapes, the ornaments, the mirrors, the floor coverings. The attic was bare except for a chaise longue and three armchairs.

I took money from the office safe, downstairs, and sent Holger and Hank on their way. We had trolleys to wheel the chests back to the restaurant kitchen and the tunnel into the bunker. I did not accept half measures: at the end of the day I received a call to say that they had arrived at their destination – from a young lady in Amsterdam.

While they were actually making their getaway I went boldly to the main gate with some idea of creating a diversion. It was about 8.30 and the sun was up. The postman was making his rounds. It was a beautiful summer day in Frankfurt. When I stepped out on to the street, through the main gates four, five six figures began to run towards me, plus the cameramen. In the mêlée I did something to a reporter which resulted in a lawsuit. He insisted that I used a weapon but in fact it was only my knee.

There were a number of reasons why the lawsuit was settled out of court; in fact I might have won the suit or received a light fine. The feminist magazine, *Emma*, published a photo montage of the reporter, who was one metre 90 and the dragon-lady, Paula Kim, one metre 58. About six foot five and five foot four.

All day and all night I tried to reach Charley or waited for his call as telephone and fax never stopped ringing and clicking. I slept a little in the early morning and had a variant of the surrealist dream. This time the white streets were thronged with people I knew, friends and colleagues. They were very life-like – happy, stressed, talkative, gloomy, neurotic – but I knew that I was under an evil spell, my karma was bad. I kept looking for a certain face to which I could not put a name and I could not find him anywhere...

It took me several weeks to realize what had happened.

I received a brief notice from an artists' agency in London informing Ms Kim of the Fabius Gallery, Frankfurt, that Mr K-H Kay was at present travelling in Wales. Sometimes I dream that he is still there, threading the green lanes in his roomy, customized camper, full of his designs, his beautiful wares, silk, velvet, feathers, genetic amber, cloned fish, coloured mice. I was too careful, at first, to beg for a personal call, a letter. The fuss about the "genetic amber" kept up for a long time; I was too proud, too sad to look for Charley. I think I understand at last – the love that I felt for him was simply not returned. This was an affair, moments of passion set off by the excitement of the time and the place: our summer in the Bernstein Room.

I made sure that the papers copied the news of my father's illness; when he came home from Berlin – there was no question now of his speaking at an opening – he suffered a stroke. He was found on a bench in the park where he had often taken lunch with my mother. He regained consciousness for a few moments in the University Clinic and pressed my hand.

"When Charley comes back," he said in a breathless whisper, "he will take care of everything... Paula, I am so glad..."

He did not speak again. The funeral was absolutely private, in accordance with his wishes. I sent his ashes to be scattered in the sea, off Gran Canaria, his holiday island. There were fewer condolences than one might have expected. I received a card from Scotland with a formal expression of sympathy and reviews of a new environment in an Edinburgh gallery "by the young Swiss designer Carlo Henry."

The obituary notices pointed out that Axel Fabius, noted patron of the arts, came from a family of bankers. He had been at Oxford University when the Second World War broke out and he remained there throughout the war, although he was not Jewish. Thus he came into the category of those who were either anti-nazis or persons who had betrayed their fatherland, or both, like Willi Brandt who took refuge in Norway. It was noted that he returned to Germany in 1949 and later married the youngest daughter of a South Korean diplomat.

Any official investigations – the police, for instance, looking for dangerous genetic amber – were cut short. There was one half-hearted search of the Villa Astrid and a polite Detective Inspector, accompanied by a female Sergeant, questioned me. I told them the Bernstein Room had been packed up and sent to Belgium; I managed to give the impression that this had been done by assistants from Trade Winds. The worst thing that had happened as a result of our scandal was my problem with the injured reporter. I could not decide whether I was being hard done by or not. A tall stranger had rushed at me and lifted me off the ground by my left upper arm – but I knew I was not in real danger. Perhaps I should not have kneed him in the groin.

It was September now. I understood that Charley-as-I-knew-him would never come back. It hit me harder than I would have believed; I lay in bed in the atelier feeling sick and faint. I told myself that Paula, when she felt better, would probably continue with Fabius's life work. My friends, Monika, Dagmar, Kurt and Maja, who had flown at once from New York, were support-

ive, warm and kind. They cherished me.

Suddenly there was a burst of strange activity: the law-firm who represented the Fabius family and more especially the Fabius Galleries, suggested that I might care to find my own lawyer. I obediently found Frau Gerda Wischinsky of Darmstadt, a friend of Dagmar. She undertook some research on my behalf and there, perhaps, was the last act of the play, the last note of the symphony. My father, Axel Fabius, was a rich man; the part of his estate that I must receive by law, as his daughter and heir, was considerable, and he also left me the house on Gran Canaria. He made bequests to art foundations and to former employees, including Holger. He left the Fabius Galleries, in their park, entirely to Charley Keller.

I had no doubt that Charley would accept the bequest, become the true heir of Axel Fabius. Frau Wischinsky reassured the nervous Old Firm that Frau Kim-Fabius would not dream of trying to upset the testament. I did allow her to point out, however, that Fabius had made the bequest in the belief that Charley would be a family member, a son-in-law, in effect, whether or not Charley and Paula married or simply lived as partners.

I left the Villa Artemisia as precipitately as we had packed up the Bernstein Room and was air sick for the first time in my life as I flew to the Canary Isles. I never knew whether Charley would have had the nerve to offer to keep me on managing the galleries. The entire management and staff of the *Zaoshen* restaurant threatened to quit their jobs in a gesture of solidarity with me, but I persuaded Herr Soong and the others to stay on, see how things went.

Now I am looking out over the blue summer sea from my house in Las Palmas, which looks just a little like my dear atelier. I think I understand what happened. The Genetic Amber, so-called, in the Bernstein Room, played a definite part in the lives of Axel Fabius and his daughter.

It enhanced my love for Charley Keller and his feeling for me; it brought Fabius to his own acceptance of Charley as a suitor. He performed his last macho gesture, his last well-meant attempt to care for my welfare. I had managed the galleries, made it my life work as well as his, but he decided it was better in the hands of a man – a charming, artistically gifted man, who seemed bound to become my life partner.

I will never know Charley's side of the story. It seems to me now that he was cowardly, too much afraid of the "authorities," of the police and of the media. I was distressed at his readiness to give up his name and drive about in Wales or Scotland designing under various other names. Yet I have played about with my own names very often..

I remember how I drove down to Zeppelinheim, to Trade Winds in September, the beginning of autumn. I still could hardly believe that Charley might not whisk out of hiding. He would take me in his arms and sneak me in through a little door to drink applewine and make love on a trestle table covered with real ostrich feathers and fake leopard skin.

The hangar was empty; he had had it packed up. The big inn sign, with the name TRADE WINDS, had been defaced with black paint and lay in a big trash container out on the landing field. Around the corner his

neat bungalow had a For Sale notice on the lawn and I considered wandering about the empty rooms but decided this was too morbid.

Charley has begun to correspond with me, first through our lawyers, then directly. His letters about the everyday running of the galleries are clumsily written in a tone of conciliation and camaraderie. Karl-Heinz Keller was never really a man of words, he was a physical type. I think of his physical appearance very often and wish I had albums of his family photographs.

Over Christmas and New Year friends flew in from Germany but now I have no more guests. I swim in the house pool and do not go down into the town. Maria and Franco look after the house and take care of me very well. I have had a third dream of that white surreal city; there are people in the streets wearing strange clothes, I walk along hand in hand with the child. A beautiful little boy with amber eyes. So indeed the effects of New Gene Plastic will be put to the test. The pregnancy is perfectly normal and so is the growing child, according to a barrage of tests. It is probable that Charley will find out that he has a son but without the right environment, so to speak, I don't believe he will have strong parental feelings.

"Genetic Amber" shows no signs of going away. Before me on the desk I have a beautiful silver pendant set with a smooth piece of amber; I hold it to my cheek when I feel depressed or afraid. Hank, Holger's friend, designs and makes jewellery. The anti-genetic lobby shows little interest in their thriving mail-order business. In New Age journals and youth publications throughout the low countries there are advertisements for mood pendants, soul rings, memory brooches. They give me a cut of the profits; a friendly chemist has discovered how to grow more "amber" when the supply runs out.

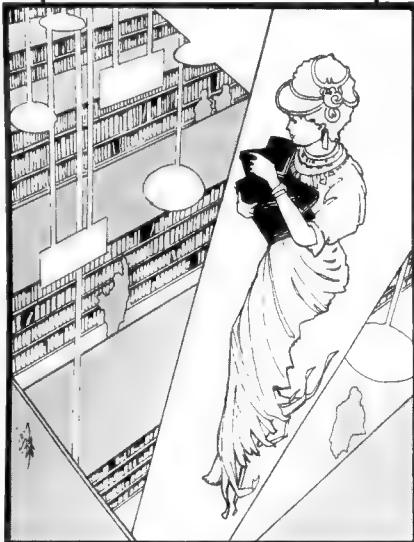
Of course I kept back three large, fine pieces of New Plastic when the Bernstein Room was packed up. There was only one place for them: I gave them to my friend Dagmar, in Darmstadt.

Hard by the official observatory and tracking station there is a smaller observatory where a group of first-contact-hoppers keep vigil. Now rays of amber coloured light go streaming up into the night skies together with the dear music that we played last summer. Maybe this sound and light display will lure down other fans of "The Bernstein Room."

Cherry Wilder, who spent many years living in Germany but recently has returned to her native New Zealand, last appeared here with "The Curse of Kali" (issue 103). Of the above story, she says:

"I began 'The Bernstein Room' in 1992, in the midst of the media hue and cry about the Lost Amber Room, complete with April 1st joke from Hessen Radio/TV. Then hard times came upon our family and I did not take up the story again until 1995, two computers and two house-moves later. Now it is finished. When I saw that my friend Ian Watson had been inspired by the same lost treasure I asked for a copy of his story. His cover novelette, 'The Amber Room,' *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, August 1995, proved to be a fine, adventurous, mystical Watson tale. As I guessed it is not in the least like 'The Bernstein Room' – which raises the question of environment. Or of genes?"

BOOKS



REVIEWED

I once saw a TV programme about an island somewhere in the Caribbean where, through a mutation traced back to an extremely fertile woman in the late 18th century, the people all arrive as baby girls at birth. This appearance is sustained until adolescence, when half the population ripens as one might expect. In the other half normal, and in due course functional, male genitals appear. As the name of the island was kept secret, allegedly to protect the islanders from the curiosity of the idly prurient, the story may be a scientific leg-pull, but Carolyn Ives Gilman has adopted the idea in *Halfway Human* (Avon, \$5.99).

On the planet Gammadis, a lost colony of Earth, the whole population is affected, to the astonishment of the people of Capella Two, the most advanced of human-colonized worlds, who make first contact. I was inevitably reminded of the setup on Le Guin's Gethen: on Gethen there was a minority of "perverts," throwbacks to what we would regard as normal sexuality, while on Gammadis there are neuters, who never develop at all. As such they are ideal objects of persecution, to be denied human rights, enslaved (though in truth every member of that society is a slave) and assigned all the most dirty, dangerous and menial of tasks. To justify this barbarity it is put about that neuters are mentally slightly less than human (though in truth they display the full human range), and those who fail to cooperate with the lie are likely to be tranquilized until it becomes the truth, as far as they are concerned.

They are utterly without protection, Gammadis being an extreme communist polity where there is no serious money and children have no

idea who their parents are. Their position is the more wretched because (somewhat implausibly in a technically advanced culture) there is no way of predicting who will become what before the normal age of puberty. Thus they are reared with the others in the expectation that they will in due course undergo a rite of passage and be received into a society of men and women, only to have the gates of adulthood slammed in their faces – regardless of aptitudes, personal qualities, talents or skills.

It's a strong if somewhat unlikely situation (I think of the immense power often wielded by eunuchs in Byzantium, Peking, Venice...) and Gilman handles it extremely well. Had this book been ascribed to Ursula Le Guin and set in the Hainish universe (which would be a very easy conversion), I'd be saying that Le Guin had recovered over 90% of her best form. Indeed, I suspect Gilman of having consciously modelled herself on Le Guin, as the contrast between the ideologies of Gammadis (stratified, virtually cash-free) and Capella Two (stratified, information-market based) is strongly reminiscent of Anarres and Urras in *The Dispossessed*. Unusually, and to the immense enhancement of the book's credibility, the political economy of Gammadis makes sense: one feels the underlying despair of a society where, because serious money or property cannot be handed down to the next generation, even the most powerful are never free – they must always conform, lest they be expelled from the establishment which has nurtured them, employed them and (most of all) conferred their privileges.

The book is written in two voices: third-person from the viewpoint of Valerie Endrada, a Capellan ethnologist, and first-person from that of Thedla, a neuter who arrives on Capella Two in a distressed condition, comes under Valerie's less-than-adequate protection and tells her its life-story. Thedla is cursed with what ought to have been a blessing: it possesses to a spectacular degree the sort of beauty which is quite stunning

in young people of both sexes. It is also a creature of powerful affections, but while its feelings for other people lie wholly in the domain of philos, the response it evokes belongs to Eros.

Gilman handles the first-person aspect rather more effectively than the third, where she tends to overdo her references to Valerie's humdrum domestic life and concerns; but her account of the physical, sexual and psychological abuse heaped on Thedla, and the psychic distortion that it inflicts upon itself in order to survive, is masterful. Much of it consists of a story of forbidden love, made the more poignant (and the more surely doomed) because, though it is spiritual on both sides, it is physical on one side only.

Inevitably Valerie becomes emotionally involved with Thedla, and just as inevitably she comes to see herself as its protector against the heavies from its own world and hers. To them Thedla is a pawn in a complex game based on the value of the information each can extract from the other. The winner will be whichever gets most while paying least, but either way the pawn will be sacrificed sooner or later.

That makes for an adequately suspenseful main plot, though it's the flashback over Thedla's tragic life which makes the book. It's therefore the more surprising that Gilman significantly fails to convey any idea of the millennia that must have elapsed between her setting and the present. All the minutiae of social life on both Gammadis and Capella are precisely as we now observe them, from the layout of a formal dinner party to the layout of a themed coffee-bar, so that this book could be re-written as a clash between two near-future US multinationals almost as easily as an addition to the Hainish canon.

She also gilds the lily somewhat by stating that Gammadian society is increasing its demand for neuters, and therefore aborting sexual development in many (perhaps including Thedla) who might otherwise have enjoyed it. As advancing technology notoriously diminishes the demand for unskilled labour, this reduces the credibility of the whole, and it would have made more sense if the proportion of neuters was naturally increasing, to the dismay of the fertiles, who are constrained by tradition from treating them as equals, yet must find some economic use for all of them. Perhaps a sequel will make sense of it, but none is hinted at.

Lack of imagination in these minor areas detracts from the overall atmosphere, but in every other department this is an excellent novel. I hope it gains a UK publisher with the wit to issue it in handsome hardback instead of Avon's cheap and cheerful A-format. You don't get to introduce the new Le Guin every day.

Chris Gilmore

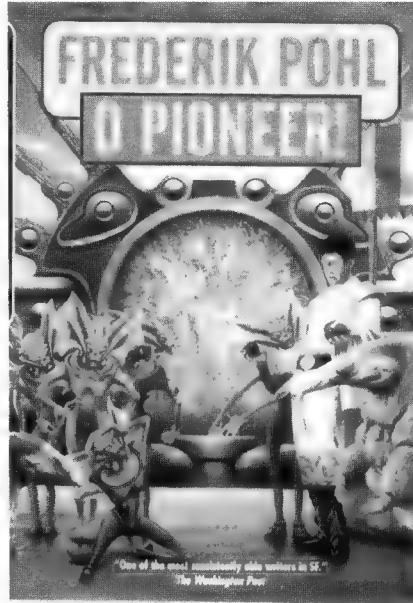
A New Le Guin?

Reading Ian McDonald's *Kirinya* (Gollancz, £16.99 [not to be confused with Mike Resnick's *Kirinyaga*: see review by David Matheu elsewhere in this issue – Editor]) put me in mind of a well known critical conundrum: "Exactly what are we condemning when we condemn 'fine writing'?" When it is set as a seminar subject, debate usually degenerates into a shouting-match as the participants attack each other's taste, so this review is going to be more subjective than usual.

McDonald's style has always been on the lush side, and in *Chaga* (reviewed in *Interzone* 102) he chose a lush subject – the transformation of large areas of the tropics into something rich and alien. Lush writing is not bad by definition, but there are occasions, and especially in this book, when his style parts company with his content and wanders off into the domain of the fey: "Giraffe moved through light bush; in silhouette they seemed like vowels from an organic alphabet." Letters, possibly; but why not consonants? (They look like lower-case lambda to me.)

This sequel is set some years later when the Chaga has stopped expanding and its potential is beginning to be recognized and exploited. It's told mainly from the viewpoints of three women: Gaby McAslan, now addicted to "patches" supplied by her unscrupulous Australian boyfriend; Gaby's teenage daughter, an "isopath" (i.e., able to link telepathically with specific people); and Oksana Telyanina, a Siberian pilot. It's a violent tale, as various factions seek to control the Chaga and the Big Dumb Object (as they call the gigantic alien spaceship which has been built by the Chagamakers and set in orbit between Earth and Moon). Some of the incidents described, including an execution by abrasion, a mass murder conducted in the manner of Frederik Pohl's *A Plague of Pythons*, and a Caesarean section performed without anaesthetic, are definitely not for the squeamish.

The climax is set on the Big Dumb Object itself, where some but by no means all of what's going on is explained, but as the major political actors both in Chaga itself and the northern hemisphere are all still active, there's no guessing when or how the series will end. I view the prospect of further sequels with mixed feelings; McDonald has invested the Chaga and the BDO with so many qualities and capabilities that they're already starting to swamp the story, resulting in the usual crop of inconsistencies. One of the advantages of Chaga life is that you don't grow old or die from natural causes, but a bus which operates there is described as having been the scene of violent and natural death, but more of the latter.



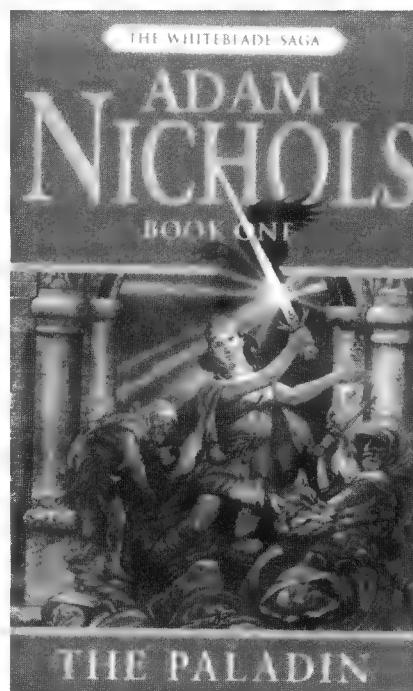
Despite the richness of McDonald's prose and the ingenuity of the ideas, I found the effect oppressive after a while, as I would expect to find the company of so many control-freaks. Every character in the book seems determined to stamp a particular vision on the future of the Chaga, and sets about achieving it with total disregard for the consequences to him/herself or anyone else. I felt like banging their heads together, with the comment that it's really only about money in the end, there's surely enough to go round, and the fine details of the distributive system are hardly worth dying for – especially if you've got a good chance of living forever. But as *Kirinya* is set in Africa and McDonald lives in Ulster, he could surely plead psychological realism to justify the many excesses described. Come to think of it, I read the book on holiday in Croatia, which also offers ample support for his view of human nature. "A mad world, my masters,"

and it will take more than the gifts of the gods to bring it sanity.

In the days before the darker sort became fashionable, every new production was hyped as a "light comedy." After all, someone said, who would go to see a heavy one? I think I can answer that: admirers of Frederik Pohl. The jokes in his latest offering, *O Pioneer!* (Tor, \$21.95) are ponderous, and he's in no hurry to reach punchlines, but they're delivered with the smooth grace of a hunting python, to excellent cumulative effect.

The book is essentially the tale of a Man Who Learnt Better. Evesham Giyt (now, what would that be an anagram of?) has lived the solipsistic life of a computer hacker and thief before (rather to his own surprise) marrying an ex-hooker and starting a new life on Tupelo, the only extra-solar world so far colonized by mankind. It's a pleasant enough world, but consists almost wholly of ocean, with just one small continent (inconveniently situated at the north pole) and a number of island chains reminiscent of Hawaii. Moreover, it's already getting crowded, as the humans are only the latest of six intelligent species to set up shop there. To the exasperation of many, the other races regard us as a primitive people, not to be exploited exactly, but to be assigned those tasks such as land-clearance and heavy construction which require no great sophistication. Other, more advanced, species specialize in fusion-power, maintenance of the gate which connects Tupelo to all the home worlds, and study of the native biochemistry; human manufacturing is limited to mainly rather cheap knick-knacks and gimbicks for sale to the undiscerning back home – in America, the US having obtained (probably by improper means) a monopoly of transport through the gate.

Giyt lets himself be appointed human mayor (other species have their own leaders). The position offers a lot more kicks than ha'pence, but he buckles down to establishing relationships with the various ETs and picking away at the mystery which pervades Tupelo. There's obviously something criminal being plotted, but who's in the conspiracy? There are other, perhaps less sinister, mysteries connected with at least some of the ETs. I was set for a long, enjoyable read when I noticed there wasn't much book left. Why I can't fathom, but Pohl seems to have suddenly tired of his creation. He brings the major mystery to a very rushed denouement and ends the book, at least a hundred pages early, leaving the minor mysteries unresolved and the secondary plotlines in mid air. I found it deeply unsatisfying, the more so as there's nothing in the quality of the writing to suggest why Pohl found himself disenchanted. This is half of a very enjoyable book, and if Pohl didn't





want to finish it himself, he should have looked for someone to write the other half – he's not exactly inexperienced in collaboration.

Adam Nichols's latest from Millennium, *The Paladin* (£6.99), describes itself as Book One of the Whiteblade Saga. As it features an enchanted sword, the wielder thereof, prophecies concerning her, and a high body-count, I class it as heroic fantasy, but it has some unusual features, not least the character of its heroine.

Elinor begins the book as a foolish and wilful young woman, far too inclined to leap without looking (especially if she's leaping towards an attractive man) and notably lacking in judgment (especially of men). These qualities, plus some ill luck, ensure that the book's structure can be summarized as a 500-page serial progress from frying-pan to fire, in the course of which Elinor gains some much-needed wisdom, skill with the

sword which she has literally thrust upon her, and a modicum of sexual experience, not all of it enjoyable.

Elinor has been brought up in a back-of-beyond fishing village, in lamentable ignorance of the wider world. On being pitchforked into it (through being kidnapped by white-slavers and then shipwrecked), she finds herself regarded as a person of mystical significance, an axle (or perhaps a channel) around or through which mighty events are destined to occur. This disturbs her, with its vagueness as much as its implicit responsibilities, and neither vagueness nor responsibilities are much mitigated by the book's end, for all that it moves at a cracking pace with a pleasing variety of scene to a climax which, while gruesome enough to be satisfying, leaves obvious openings for the sequel. Nichols has also invented a new and interesting class of being which he calls "humanimals": animals onto which sorcerers

of an earlier generation have grafted some human qualities and the power of speech. They breed true, but are afflicted with an angst all their own deriving from their mixed character: even to themselves they are not wholly one thing or another, and the more xenophobic humans fear and therefore persecute them.

Nichols has not entirely shaken off his habit of putting cod profundities into the mouths of allegedly wise minor characters, but it's much less in evidence than in *The Pathless Way* (reviewed in *Interzone* 117). Also on the plus side, he's extremely good at portraying quarrels and misunderstandings between frightened, mistrustful and not very bright people. He even manages some rather grim jokes, as when Elinor believes her interview for a deckhand's berth is going rather well, unaware that in fact she's being interviewed for ship's doxy. Perils of Pauline? Yes, but very well done.

Chris Gilmore

Wearing this season's safari suit, Mike Resnick struts to the end of the catwalk, and turns. The unembarrassed Resnick is as much on display as is his latest book, *Kirinyaga: A Fable of Utopia* (Del Rey, \$25). "I confess that I am not the most modest, self-effacing man in the world," he tells us in a six-page afterword, but the declaration is unnecessary. "How does one go about writing the most honoured science-fiction book in history?" he has already asked rhetorically. "Well, not on purpose, believe me." Thank gods for that: even Resnick has his limits, and didn't plan those award nominations in advance. At one point there is unintentional humour in the afterword. Referring to the sixth chapter/story in *Kirinyaga* (the book being what John Clute calls a "fix-up" – a novel built of previously sold work), Resnick admits, "It was not nominated for a Hugo, but I think the reason was technical rather than because of a lack of quality." Hilarious stuff.

But if we grope through the talcum-powder fog of Resnick's latest pampering session, what might be found?

A well-executed book. Kenya, by the 22nd century, is overcrowded and polluted; many animals are extinct. Koriba, a clever idealist, establishes an alternative Kenya on a planetoid that he calls Kirinyaga (after the sacred mountain). Koriba becomes the witch doctor and ensures that all of the old ways are maintained. For example, he strangles a baby because it is born feet-first and must be a demon. He is visited by a representative from Maintenance (the outside world), who learns of the man's inflexibility. Koriba exhibits bull-headed arrogance, but is not always correct in his assumptions; for all his tribal wisdom, he does not come across as very clever, and he is a cross between the Wizard of Oz and the

The Big Ego Hunters

David Mathew

vengeful Lord of the Old Testament.

Problems are resolved in a way that is often alien to the Western imagination. Resnick points a finger at the reader as surely as Thomas More did in *Utopia* (1516), or Samuel Butler did in *Erewhon* (1872). What do we think about compulsory male and female circumcision? About a society in which people are not allowed to read, and in which a girl who tries to educate herself (by working on Koriba's computer, the "magic box," in "For I Have Touched the Sky") is punished by a curse? About old people being left out to be killed by wild animals?

Although Koriba has frequent contact with the outside (when the weather needs changing) he does not respect the people. Therefore, he is not pleased to call in a hunter from the outside in the relatively dull "Bwana," or when a couple is invited in in "The Manamouki." Suspicion is as natural to Koriba as a reflex pleasantries is to an educated Englishman, and in the latter story, it is well founded. The woman, in particular, makes enemies among Kirinyaga's female population; it's an unusual take on racism. In "The Lotus and the Spear" there is a suicide epidemic. In "Song of a Dry River" there are tensions between Kirinyaga's chief and his mother, who does not like her daughters-in-law. Showing just how harsh he can be, Karobi deliberately causes a drought to solve the problem...

If Resnick had wanted a novel, he should have removed the scene-setting paragraphs and fact-dumps from every story after the first. The ideal way to read this book would be a story here and there, savouring every thought. As a novel, read straight through, there is repetition. Once we have heard that a hyena leaving droppings where you live is a bad sign, we do not need to hear it again. In a novel, would each crisis be so neatly tucked away before the new one in the next chapter? There would be more of a narrative strand.

In Scott Mackay's *Outpost* (Tor, £24.95), there is another set of people cut off from the world. In prison, while the robotic gaolers (*the carcerieri*) are malfunctioning, a female inmate called Felicitas tries to remember the murder she is supposed to have committed. She has woken up from the fugue state in which her fellow prisoners remain: "My memory's vanished but ... I feel like someone's opened a door." Before long it is opined that she is simply the descendant of a criminal. Along with others who are awake, she becomes one of the *superstiti*: "one of the survivors." As such, she is allowed a regular meal, although the food is running out; they must escape soon. A lattice is built and leant "against the wall, wide enough for five to climb," but it still takes ages for them to get out. A character called Maritano has taken control of the dead (turning the story into a zombie flick) and the battles inside the prison walls may draw interesting parallels with civil war. Having escaped, they are recaptured, apart from Felicitas who runs off into a forest to hide. She goes back to prison, and then later to New Florence, where she meets her mother for the

first time in years. And *Outpost* becomes a time-travel drama as excursions must be made into the Italian Renaissance.

Unfortunately, there is more bad work than good in this book. The insects in the head ("an anti-escape system... triggered by the demise of the *carcerieri*") are interesting; but *Outpost* is a model with too many clothes on. It has blimped itself up to a hefty weight, there being a thin person boiling inside. Maybe even a novella would have been too long, for we could certainly have painlessly lost the acres of trite conversation and the repetitions and explanations. For example, "Was there something familiar about the woman's voice? Felicitas thought there might be. Felicitas thought this might be the woman who had read to her" – where surely only the third sentence is important. Or: "'Grazie, signore,' she said. The words came reflexively to her lips. Italian words. Popping suddenly into her English speech."

The writing exhibits little flair or panache; there is an overuse of rhetorical questions, and far too much prevaricating and faffing around. Silly philosophizing interrupts the gunning down of enemies when they emerge from some water. There's no sense of movement or development. And the characters are unconvincing: "Felicitas had a funny feeling in her stomach; it was as if she had never truly looked at a man until she had looked at Rosario. He glanced up from his work. Their eyes met. And it wasn't at all like looking into Maritano's eyes, eyes as mute as stones, but like gazing at stars. Rosario's eyes were bright with meaning." As the story was beginning to read like a cheap romance, I was expecting him to clutch her in his muscular arms; expecting a heaving bosom (or two). But no... Pub Bore's Law states that one's level of boredom will increase incrementally, the longer the tedious event occurs. At least that didn't happen: my level of boredom was constant throughout.

Steven Barnes's *Iron Shadows* (Tor, \$24.95) is much better. It opens with a man and a woman being pursued by something unnamed, the man wounded, and the woman trying to tell him she loves him before something dreadful happens. It's soon clear, as we enter the long flashback, that their names are Cat (the woman) and Jax (the man), a divorced couple still working together as detectives, with a third party, Tyler – Cat's brother. Aided by hi-tech surveillance equipment (in fast, film-like scenes), they rescue a little girl from a heavy called Milton Quest, who wants to leave the United States...

Next story. They are asked to attend a performance by Joy and Tomo (female and male respectively), who are twins and "sex gurus," the leaders of a cult called the Golden

Sun, and able (it is rumoured) to heal others miraculously. In the interests of any future investigation, Cat goes up on stage as a volunteer (along with others) and witnesses a brilliant trick involving fire – if indeed it is a trick. At the office they are visited by Sinclair, a man who wants the agency to investigate his sister, Kolla, who has got involved with the Golden Sun, and has handed over her fortunes to them, despite the fact that she is a "normal, impressionable, headstrong, passionate girl." They take the case.

Kolla's boyfriend is killed in hospital by a supernatural force whose weapon is sex: "The sensation went beyond pleasure now, heightening to a place surpassing ecstasy, beyond even pain, as if something were simultaneously draining him and injecting the most exquisite poison." He is only one of several people who die after "betraying" the twins; is it any wonder that anywhere Cat and Jax try to find answers, people behave suspiciously? (One character even eats glass rather than inform.)

Cat and Jax attend one of the twins' workshops, knowing that the emphasis will be on sexual healing. They are being paid 50 grand for their troubles. Having no idea that the twins are on to them, the partners play whatever games are suggested (food, feathers, role-reversal, partner-swapping, comparing each other's genitals to animals: you know how it goes) while trying to find out about Kolla. (We also get a re-examination of their marriage, which is interesting.) But Cat is changing; she is becoming more perceptive to the world around; and she is having unbidden thoughts about an attic, among other things.

Having found Kolla, Cat and Jax are captured – by Sinclair... and Milton Quest, back from the first reel. But Tyler is still on the case... A thousand miles from the work he did with Larry Niven, this is an exciting, pacy narrative from Barnes – with pyromania, rivalry, and inanimate objects coming to life!

The Icefalcon in *Icefalcon's Quest* by Barbara Hambly (Del Rey, \$24) is a warrior who goes after an evil wizard (Bektis) and his female companion (Hethya) after the boy prince of Dare is kidnapped. He does so because he has been outwitted (he and Bektis have a history). He encounters demons on his travels – or clones. Examining tracks at one point, he concludes the following: "All four men were the same height, judg-

ing by the length of their strides, and all four exactly the same weight." But the Icefalcon is not a perfect hero, thankfully.

The Icefalcon follows Bektis "out from Sarda Pass" and observes as the sorcerer is attacked. The kidnapped prince becomes friendly with Hethya while the Icefalcon becomes allies with characters with names like Loses His Way and Cold Death (who can look into pools and find answers to difficult questions). We discover that even Bektis is only a lackey following orders; the corruption reaches upwards, for the boy prince is only a pawn in the twisted plot of a diabolical conqueror whose aim is to rule the world!

This is a book of membranes and illusions. There is knowledge, for example, of a version of our real world: "they had almost completely dropped the tongue of their own world, even when speaking to one another, save for words that had no translation in the Wathe, like *tee-vee* and *car* and *Academy Awards*." Or: "a heavenly choir of angels playing the back half of 'Layla' on electrified harps." Or, more colloquially, "Well, I'll be buggered."

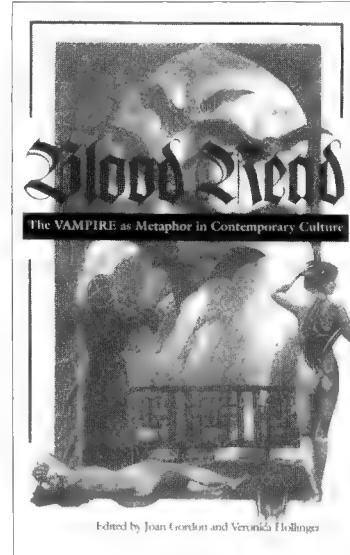
The evocation of the cold is well done.

Finally, *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture* (eds. Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger, University of Pennsylvania Press, \$16.50 or £16.50) is an excellent and filling collection of essays on

one of the most powerful images in horror and speculative fiction; and the editors have made a good job of representing "the vampire as [a] late twentieth-century cultural necessity." To attempt to condense the ideas of 15 essays and a foreword (by Brian Aldiss) would be a folly, but this book contains work on the history of vampire fiction, on Japanese vampires, Anne Rice, movies, gay vampire connec-

tions (Trevor Holmes' "Coming Out of the Coffin" – my favourite title in the book), the postmodern vampire, and even the "ingratiating master vampire of consumer capitalism." Both Suzy McKee Charnas and Brian Stableford analyze their own vampire fiction. And much, much more, as they say. An important reference manual. Not all of it you'll agree with, but the points made should be acknowledged if you have any interest in vampire fiction.

David Mathew





The advent of the supermarket in the early 20th century opened up a new economic environment, in which consumers in search of staple products – who had earlier been forced to rely on the retailer's choice of supplier – suddenly found the burden of choice transferred to them. The supermarket shelves had room for all the different labels, and thus became the arena of the Great Brand War, whose fierce fighting was the economic hot-house in which modern advertising techniques evolved. When the philosophy of brand warfare spread to American newsstands it caused the genreification of popular fiction, one of whose minor corollaries was the birth of science fiction.

Within the sub-genre of alternative histories customers have usually been subject to the choices made by authors as to what the most important points of historical divergence were (World War II, the American Civil War, etc), for the simple reason that there weren't enough alternative histories available at any one time for consumer choice to have much discriminative effect. The recent boom in such stories has, however, allowed the supermarket principle to come into force. Readers can now employ their purchasing power to vote for the kinds of alternative history they like best, knowing that publishers – and, in their turn, writers – will be forced to respond. It is possible, therefore, that *Heartfire* by Orson Scott Card (Tor, \$24.95), *Newton's Cannon* by J. Gregory Keyes (Del Rey, \$14) and *Darwinia* by Robert Charles Wilson (Tor \$22.95) provide significant indicators of the way in which that particular brand battle will be decided.

Heartfire is the fifth novel in the "Tales of Alvin Maker," which track the career of a Christlike superman in an alternative 19th-century America. In spite of this alternative history's Revolution there are still "Crown Colonies" in the American south and the southern states of "Appalachee" are independent of the northern Union. The main difference between Card's world and ours, however, is that magical powers are manifest in the supernatural "knacks" which many people have – and which might lie dormant in the as-yet-unawakened majority.

One of the great advantages of alternative-history stories, from the writer's point of view, is that it is easy to find ready-stigmatized villains; the plot and counterplot of this volume pit its hero and heroine against witchfinders and slave-owners (with a nasty brother thrown in to add a more intimate dimension). Another advantage is the chance to recruit the great men of history to one's own causes, so Alvin's role is here supplemented by John Adams

The Supermarket Principle

Brian Stableford

(father of the slightly-more-famous John Quincy Adams) and his brother's by a supremely self-confident but as-yet-undiscovered Honoré de Balzac. Both plots amble along at a steady pace until the time arrives for the laid-back miracle worker to slip into third gear and sort out the immediate problems of his wife and disciples with a casual flourish – leaving witch-hunting and slavery in place, just in case they need to do straw-man duty in future episodes of the potentially-infinite series.

Newton's Cannon is far less laid-back than *Heartfire*. Its cliffhanger-strewn plot and counterplot builds up to a feverish pitch and its climax dismisses the last fugitive echoes of our own history with a very spectacular bang. Even so, it is merely the first volume of a series collectively entitled "The Age of Unreason." Here, the divergence from known history comes about because Isaac Newton's investigations in alchemy have borne technological fruit even more prolific than those borne by his enquiries into optics and mechanics, allowing dramatic advances in communications

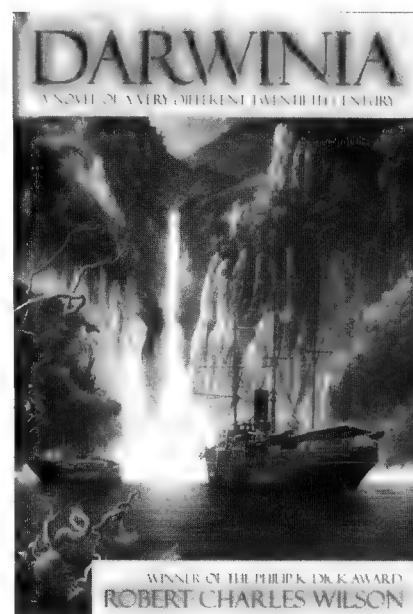
and weaponry. Newton is a background character in the plot-strand whose main protagonist is a teenage Benjamin Franklin, while a rejuvenated Louis XIV is the key figure in the counterplot, whose fashionably spunky heroine needs only a little help from Nicolas d'Artagnan. The latter's presence pays polite homage to Alexandre Dumas père, Keyes's principal model and research-tool; Voltaire, alas, only has a cameo role.

If *Newton's Cannon* were not set in so distant an era (circa 1720) one would be tempted to call it steampunk; it is in much the same spirit as the classics of that chimerical subgenre. It is, at any rate, a rousing "gonzo historical" adventure whose most significant precedent was set by Howard Waldrop's "...The World as We Know't" (1982). Its gaudy panache distances it from *Heartfire*, but it has one highly significant element in common with it; this too is a tale of a history which turned out differently because a certain kind of magic proved to be workable and powerful.

Darwinia begins in a history which seems to have been divorced from our own with a single miraculous event: the sudden and inexplicable replacement, in March 1912, of the continent of Europe by a trackless alien wilderness. Wilson makes much of the impact of this event on the evolution debate, "Darwinia" being the name ironically attached to the new continent by those who consider its abrupt appearance to be a triumphant vindication of Creationism. We eventually discover, however, that it is not our history that has been changed but the Archival reproduction of that history contained in the Omega Point computer (as described in Frank Tipler's *The Physics of Immortality*).

The Archive is being subverted by computer viruses which manifest themselves within its virtual reality as demonic monsters (not unlike the "angels" which will play the ultimate villainous roles in future volumes of "The Age of Unreason" now that *Newton's Cannon* has established their existence). The individuals commissioned to resist the advance of the demons and hold the fort in *Darwinia* have the power to be granted superhuman powers of their own (not unlike Alvin Maker's). Here too, therefore, we have an alternative history in which a kind of magic is workable, powerful and crucial.

It might, of course, be the case that this triple coincidence has been spontaneously generated by the boldness of writers determined to roll back the frontiers of alternative-history fiction and strike out into literary *terra incognita*. Even if the authors have felt no direct pressure from their publishers, however, they must be keenly aware of the direction in



which the winds of change are blowing through the literary marketplace. They must know that the brand warfare which has now been raging in popular fiction for a whole lifetime has driven science fiction to the brink of extinction, and that its shelf-space has been almost entirely taken over by fantasy. As seasoned pros, they must have observed that the alternative-history sub-genre is one which can be transplanted wholesale from one genre to the other by the simple

expedient of adding the magic ingredient. In making that move they are recognizing the implacable force of economic logic and bowing to its dictates, as any good Capitalist – or Darwinist – would.

For the record, Orson Scott Card still clings to the belief that a world in which magic works might be saved, if only it had a saviour with God's muscle behind him; Robert Charles Wilson would like to believe that, but if the horribly patchy con-

clusion to his novel is any guide he can't actually convince himself of it; J. Gregory Keyes assumes that if people ever did discover the power to do almost anything the first thing some of them would do – with or without angelic prompting – is blast the world to smithereens. I'm with Keyes, but all the carefully packaged ideologies are available right there on the shelf, so you can take your pick.

Brian Stableford

"Guards! Guards!" Terry Pratchett's Discworld live on stage..." claimed a poster at Keele. I've not read the whole series but I'd read enough to want to see this. Tickets were suspiciously easy to buy at three days' notice. The publicity blazed one-liner phrases of praise from the national press but the only full reviews displayed in the theatre (Royal, Hanley) were credited to *Eastern Daily Press*, *The Journal* and *Ramtop Rimfall*. Not good omens.

Geoffrey Cusack, who adapted *Guards!...* for the stage, has no visible genre skeletons in his oeuvre. Director Peter Benedict's only detectable brush with fantasy is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. However star man, Paul Darrow as Captain Vimes, is no stranger to our genre. He was Avon in *Blake's 7* and his fan club took a full-page ad in the programme to wish him well, and all concerned, a successful run. Terry, of course, remains W. H. Smug's¹ most shoplifted author. That fact may help explain the sparse crowds and was, perhaps, a warning the producers should have heeded.

Cusack and Benedict aimed to reach beyond Discworld fandom whilst keeping both the essence of the book and the characters those fans know and love. They use two strategies: firstly any Discworld references not germane to the plot are purged, secondly the cast play many parts as well known English film, radio and sitcom characters and ensembles. So out go Octarine, Binky and turtles and in come Kenneth Williams, *Round the Horn* and *Carry On* films. (Minus much of the innuendo)

The Discworld is not missed. The rim is far from the action so ...graphy, disco or geo, is immaterial. The setting, Ankh-Morpork City, is one of two characters that don't meet expectation. It doesn't have the squalor. Instinctively I feel that most denizens would be very careful where they step but, Lady Ramkin's rubber boots excepted, no one worries. Ankh-Morpork itself is cleverly realized with four simple sets on a central turntable. Turning any of these and/or a stage rotation reveals Ramkin Hall (doors with working dragonflaps – nice touch) or the Unseen University or anywhere else in the city.

The 1960s comic voices are under-

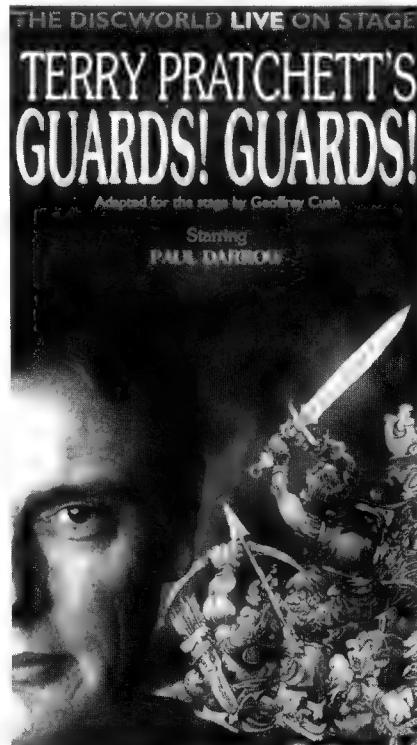


A Hit and a Miss

Roy Gray

played but help make characters familiar to a non-genre crowd. Overt campness is avoided. This is probably beneficial as Terry has not used that form of humour, to my knowledge, and I doubt it would fit. Nevertheless there are moments with a flavour of "Hello, Julian," "Hello, Sandy."

So, if you know the book; imagine Sergeant Colon played by Roger Bingham as Arthur Mullard², the Elucidated Brethren as the male *Carry On* cast, the palace guard voiced by Ken Williams. DEATH, OF COURSE, IS DERYCK GUYLER³. OBVIOUS WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT. Iain Stir-



land's Lance-Constable Carrot is, deliberately, not quite Frank Spencer⁴, but he often comes close. This worked well but it didn't pull the non-fans and probably never will. Publicity is vital for commercial success, and that was in short supply.

The other name on the billboards, after Darrow, was Nick Conway (Billy Boswell from TV's *Bread*) as cmot⁵ Dibbler. This pale shadow of Pratchett's character was not Conway's fault: the script left the part too small. He had five others to make up. Darrow played Vimes on autopilot, I wasn't always convinced. Roz McCutcheon did convince as Lady Ramkin delicately, but persuasively, against character falling for the Captain.

Maddy Sparham, superb as the librarian, clambered around the bookshelves with realistic orang-utan fluidity. Cusack built many scenes around the librarian's mode of communication: a series of comic charades (more old TV shows) which worked extremely well and had the audience in stitches.

DEATH'S VOICE is always likely to disappoint on first hearing (think about it). However the Guylerish tones, along with the tall gaunt physique and glowing yellow eyes, grew on me and soon I was convinced. The summoned dragon is never seen but the sound and lighting FX accompanying its manifestation were effective, especially as DEATH always collected its victims.

Cusack, Benedict, designers and cast caught the Discworld spirit very well and I'm sure that fans will love it. I'm less sure about everyone else. Half-empty theatres mute the audience response the show needs. Actors also miss that feedback. Pratchett is very popular but his readers are insufficient for a theatrical hit. This tour continues to 13th June and Reading. If – as hoped – there is another, try to see it. You will laugh.

Roy Gray

Footnotes:

¹ For overseas readers: W.H. Smith is a large UK chain of newsagent/booksellers.

² Arthur Mullard: "The Arthur Askey Show" (1961) and 18 films.

³ Deryck Guyler: "Sykes" (1959 on and off until 1979), and "Carry On Doctor" (1967).

⁴ "Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em" (1973-78) played by Michael Crawford.

⁵ cmot = "cut me own throat"



BOOKS

What possible connection could there be between religion and science fiction? For the devout believer, one might think none; for the equally devout unbeliever, as a friend recently wrote to me, "in a sense, all religion is sf." Certainly, enough science-fiction ideas are being absorbed into some of the stranger new religious movements. But sf itself is often claimed to be the natural place to examine religious ideas. According to the outstanding sf editor Judith Merril, who died recently, the objective of what she preferred to call speculative fiction "is to explore, to discover, to learn... something about the nature of the universe, of man, or 'reality'." This seems a pretty good objective for religion as well.

Stephen May is a lecturer in Systematic Theology in New Zealand; he's a believing Christian, and a science-fiction fan. In *Stardust and Ashes* (SPCK, £12.99) he attempts to analyze the themes and history of sf from a Christian perspective.

Although the publishers seem to think this is something new – the blurb says "Going boldly where no previous guide has gone before, this pioneering study..." – in fact there is little new here. Over the years there have been several anthologies of religious sf, each with its introductory essay; there have been numerous articles on religion in science fiction in both popular magazines and academic journals; and there have even been previous books on the subject. With one or two exceptions, May seems unaware of this previous work, including that in the academic journal *Foundation*, based at the Science Fiction Foundation at Liverpool University.

Having said that, May's book is a useful examination of how religious themes are apparent in writers from H. G. Wells, through the giants such as Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein and Philip K. Dick, up to the more recent generation of authors, such as William Gibson and Michael Swanwick. In their different ways, each has something to say about man and God, or about the purpose of (in Douglas Adams's phrase) Life, the Universe and Everything.

Sf explores the deep questions of life more than any other genre; sometimes it does this subtly, other times overtly. Whether the "Golden Age" sf of four decades ago, or the more carefully considered (and generally much better-written) speculative fiction of today, sf is a genre of marvels; one senses that Simon Magus would have loved it. And it's perhaps for that reason that May's book falls down. He discusses enlightenment, or science and religion, or the divinity of creation (all chapter titles), then suddenly seems to panic, and spends his chapter endings desper-

address whatever issues it wishes. Sf is that area of creative activity which steps aside from the reality we know, the better to examine such reality; it holds up a series of prisms, mirrors and lenses through which we can view our world, our lives, from an unusual angle, a different perspective, and under different light, so illuminating hidden corners far better than mainstream fiction can. In this way it helps readers re-evaluate their perception of "reality," to question values and beliefs, whether scientific, psychological, sociological, philosophical – or religious. And the one phrase used more than any other to describe what people get from sf would be recognized and embraced by any devout believer: a Sense of Wonder. If May had focused on this a little more, instead of becoming condemnatory and openly evangelistic in his final pages, this would have been a much more worthwhile book. Sf has never claimed to be a substitute for religion; but what May misses is that there is more than one way to ask metaphysical questions.

David V. Barrett

(A version of the above review first appeared in *Catholic Herald*, 1st May 1998; it is reprinted with permission.)

Stardust and Ashes

David V. Barrett

ately trying to divest sf of any right to be religious. He ends up accusing sf of idolatry and blasphemy, and making ridiculously generalized statements like "sf wants to abolish the distinction between Creator and creature, and does so by aspiring to the throne of the Creator." This culminates in the ludicrously facile assertion, "sf is fictitious; Christianity is true."

Of course sf is fiction; and it is because it is fiction that it can

CORRECTION – Interzone 133

*Unaccountably, the end of my review of Thomas M. Disch's **The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of** disappeared from the last issue (page 61). The break came with the phrase "Darko-Suvinián" (maybe it was the curse of the Suvins). Here is the missing text, from the beginning of the paragraph in question. – Editor*

But I am not convinced by Disch's thesis that sf is essentially an American genre. Indeed, he undermines his own case. Clearly it's a form which began in Europe and whose greatest exponent (Disch describes him as such!) was an Englishman, H.G. Wells. Actually, Disch is writing, rather confusingly, about two different science fictions – literary sf on the one hand, and cross-media "sci-fi" on the other (there's too much concentration on the latter in his book). Sci-fi, perhaps, is an American phenomenon (although the Japanese and British have contributed significantly to it: think of Godzilla and Doctor Who); but literary sf – at any rate in its larger, Darko-Suvinián sense – is a European-based form beginning with Thomas More (author, ironically, of the first "American" "novel" – *Utopia*) and running through Bacon, Swift, etc, to Wells and Stapledon, with major contribu-

tions along the way by various Continentals, from Campanella and Cyrano de Bergerac, through Verne and Kurd Lasswitz, to Capek and Stanislaw Lem. Even Hugo Gernsback was a European born-and-bred who, as a German-speaker, imported a good deal of Germanic sf into the pages of *Amazing* and *Wonder*. Disch mentions comparatively little of this: the names of Lem and the Strugatsky Brothers do not occur anywhere in his book, and Stapledon is consistently misspelled "Stapleton."

All that said, this is perhaps the first *American* book about science fiction, leaving aside collections of reviews such as Damon Knight's, James Blish's or Norman Spinrad's, which has not been written either by an academic (e.g. Scholes & Rabkin) or by a super-fan (e.g. Sam Moskowitz) – or, most importantly, by someone from within the Campbell-Heinlein clubhouse (e.g. James Gunn and almost everyone else). As such, it stands comparison with such classic non-American treatments of the genre as Kingsley Amis's *New Maps of Hell* and Brian Aldiss's *Billion-Year Spree*. It's certainly as well-written and amusing as either of those old British books – and that's high praise.

David Pringle

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Alexander, Ric, ed. **Cyber-Killers**. Introduction by Peter F. Hamilton. Orion, ISBN 0-75281-633-0, ix+540pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf anthology, first published in 1997; it contains reprint stories on a cybernetic theme by J. G. Ballard, Greg Bear, Pat Cadigan, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, William Gibson, Joe Haldeman, Harry Harrison, Frank Herbert, Peter James, Larry Niven, Terry Pratchett, Robert Sheckley, Robert Silverberg, Ian Watson, Roger Zelazny and others; many of the stories are old standards [e.g. Poul Anderson's "Sam Hall" and Alfred Bester's "Fondly Fahrenheit"], and a couple are from *Interzone* [Iain Banks's "A Gift from the Culture" and Kim Newman's "Dreamers"]; "Ric Alexander" is a pseudonym of veteran anthologist Peter Haining; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 123.) 4th May 1998.

Anderson, Kevin J. **Resurrection, Inc.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648307-0, 304pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988; its author's debut novel, presumably this is being published for the first time in the UK ten years late in order to cash in on the success of Anderson's *Star Wars* and *X-Files* spinoff novels; it has a striking cover by Moore.) 15th June 1998.

Applegate, K. A. **The Andalite's Gift.** "Animorphs: Megamorphs, 1." Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-590-11250-3, 248pp, B-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) May 1998.

Atkins, Peter. **Big Thunder.** Harper-Collins, ISBN 0-00-649014-X, 273pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1997; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 127.) 15th June 1998.

Barnes, John. **Kaleidoscope Century.** Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-657-8, 252pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 4th May 1998.

Barnes, John. **Orbital Resonance.** Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-659-4, 214pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; this appears to be the first British edition.) 4th May 1998.

Barrett, David V. **Sects, 'Cults' and Alternative Religions: A World Survey and Sourcebook.** Blandford, ISBN 0-7137-2756-X, 320pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Weston, £12.99. (Guide to alternative religions, some of them of science-fictional interest or origin [e.g. the Aetherius Society, and L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology]; first published in 1996; illustrated with 16 pages of photographs, this is a well-informed and scrupulously fair-minded book; Barrett is

of course known within the sf world as a short-story writer, editor of the anthology *Digital Dreams* [1990] and contributor of reviews and interviews to *Interzone* and elsewhere; recommended.) 4th June 1998.

Bear, Greg. **Blood Music.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60280-5, 262pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1985; the classic early Bear novel about nanotechnology – a reissue no doubt cunningly timed to coincide with the paperback of his latest, below.) 21st May 1998.

Bear, Greg. **Slant.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-611-4, 555pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1997; sequel to *Queen of Angels* [1990]; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 124; this was a Random House/Legend book in its hardcover edition, but Legend has since been taken over by Little, Brown/Orbit: with the appearance of handsome paperbacks like this, the combined list is beginning to show its real strength.) 4th June 1998.

Bradley, Rebecca. **Lady Pain.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06430-7, 336pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to the author's first two books, *Lady in Gil* [1996] and *Scion's Lady* [1997].) 6th August 1998.

Briggs, Patricia. **When Demons Walk.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00534-9, 272pp, A-format paperback, cover by Royo, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this is by another American author new to us, though we are told she has already published an Ace novel called *Steal the Dragon* [but it's not clear whether this is a sequel]; they appear to be light fantasies.) June 1998.

Brooks, Terry. **A Knight of the Word.** "The electrifying sequel to *Running with the Demon*." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-37963-2, 309pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Dark fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) August 1998.

Cholfin, Bryan, ed. **The Best of Crank!** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86740-9, 320pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; 17 stories, all copyrighted 1993-1996, all reprinted from one of the more praised new U.S. magazines of recent years, including work by Brian Aldiss, A. A. Attanasio, Michael Bishop, David R. Bunch, Karen Joy Fowler, Gwyneth Jones, Ursula Le Guin, R. A. Lafferty, Jonathan Lethem, Lisa Tuttle and Gene Wolfe, among others; it's good to see Tor encouraging small-press magazines by publishing their "bests"; however, we looked up *Crank!* [which we've never seen] in *Locus*'s report on the sf field in 1997, and discover that it published no new issues last year: that's the trouble with so many small-press magazines – no staying-power.) September 1998.

Couzens, Gary, and others, eds. **Gravity's Angels: An Anthology.** The T Party Writers' Group [Flat 2, 123 St Michael's Rd., Aldershot, Hants. GU12 4JW], ISBN 0-9532949-0-0, 100pp, small-press paperback, £4.95 [postage inclusive]. (Sf/hor-

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ror/slipstream anthology, first edition; it contains 14 stories, some reprinted from small-press magazines but the majority new, by Gary Couzens, Trevor Denyer, Sarah Ellender, David Gullen, D. F. Lewis, Trevor Mendham, Martin Owton and several others.) 9th May 1998.

Cramer, John. **Einstein's Bridge.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-78831-4, 310pp, A-format paperback, \$3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; a second hard-sf novel by the anthologist Kathryn Cramer's physicist father; all the heavies – Anderson, Bear, Benford, Brin and Wolfe – are out in force to command it; perhaps because it is published at a "special price" of \$3.99, this edition omits the lengthy non-fiction afterword and glossary which were in the original hardcover, but the publishers kindly inform us that these are available to interested readers on-line.) May 1998.

Daley, Brian. **A Screaming Across the Sky: Book Two of GammaLAW.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42209-0, 358pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Evans, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; Daley, "a Vietnam veteran, a great writer, and a great guy," according to the publishers, died a couple of years ago but it seems Del Rey have an entire new space-war series by him here; perhaps these books are being completed by another hand, but they make no hint of that.) 1st May 1998.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling, eds. **The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Eleventh Annual Collection.** St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-19034-4, cxiii+502pp, trade paperback, cover by Thomas Canty, \$17.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; yes, there are no less than 113 Roman-numbered prefatory pages, with



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incredibly detailed year's summations by the two editors, a media summation by Edward Bryant, a comics round-up, obituaries, etc; the book also contains reprint stories and poems by A.

Alvarez, Peter S. *Beagle, Ray Bradbury, Molly Brown* ["The Psychomantium," from *Interzone*], Michael Cadnum, Douglas Clegg, Charles de Lint, Christopher Fowler, Karen Joy Fowler, Charles Grant, John Kessel, Ellen Kushner & Delia Sherman, Stephen Laws, Paul McAuley & Kim Newman, Steven Millhauser, Joyce Carol Oates, Norman Partridge, Nicholas Royle [twice], Howard Waldrop, Jack Womack, Jane Yolen and many others; as ever, an impressive line-up.) *July 1998*.

Douglas, Ian. **Semper Mars: Book One of The Heritage Trilogy.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-78828-4, 376pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; it concerns the discovery of ancient human remains – or somesuch – on Mars, which sounds intriguing, but unfortunately it's decked out in the unlovely garb of "military sf" – a Baen Book published by Avon; it's copyright William H. Keith, Jr – who has previously written "Battletech" novels and much else, some of it under various pseudonyms.) *May 1998*.

Elliott, Kate. **Prince of Dogs: Volume Two of Crown of Stars.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-625-4, 580pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; "Kate Elliott" [or Katrina Elliott, as it says in the copyright statement] is a pseudonym of Alis A. Rasmussen.) *4th June 1998*.

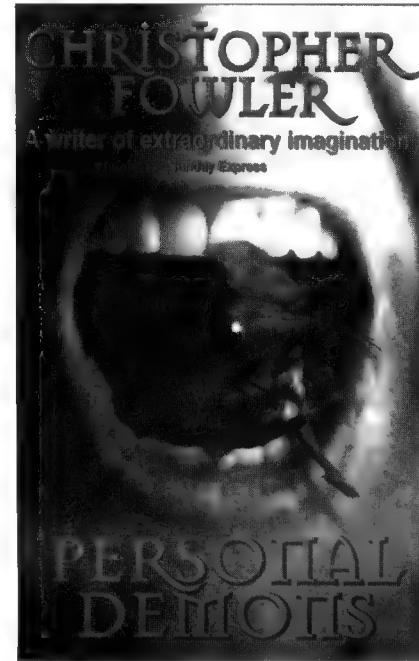
Elrod, P. N. **A Chill in the Blood.** "The Vampire Files." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00501-2, 327pp, hardcover, cover artist not credited but it's probably Fred Gambino, \$20.95. (Horror/crime novel, first edition; seventh in a series which has been underway for almost a decade now – described by the publishers as "a chilling blend of macabre humor, vampire lore, and hard-boiled detective fiction.") *1st June 1998*.

Elrod, P. N. **Lifeblood.** "Book Two in the electrifying series *The Vampire Files*." Ace, ISBN 0-441-84776-5, 202pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, \$5.99. (Horror/crime novel, first published in the USA, 1990; seventh printing.) *May (?) 1998*.

Feist, Raymond E. **Rage of a Demon King: Volume III of the Serpentwar Saga.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648298-8, xi+642pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) *1st June 1998*.

Fowler, Christopher. **Personal Demons.** Serpent's Tail, ISBN 1-85242-597-0, ix+308pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Horror collection, first edition; it contains 17 stories, with no indications of prior publication, although we assume at least some of them must have appeared in magazines or original anthologies; there is also an elegant three-page preface by the author in which, *en passant*, he commends the late Dr Christopher Evans's *Mind at Bay* [1969] and *Mind in Chains* [1970], both long-out-of-

print Panther Books paperback originals, as "the best horror anthologies ever produced" – an interesting opinion, since both were rather unorthodox from the generic point of view, being influenced by Moorcock's *New Worlds* and containing stories by Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, John Sladek and others not often associated with horror [rather like the first few issues of *Interzone*, in fact]; perhaps Serpent's Tail ought to republish those two books?) *16th June 1998*.



Fowler, Christopher. **Soho Black.** Warner, ISBN 0-7515-2559-6, 378pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; a movie executive drops dead in a Soho [London] bar, and then begins his real career...; sounds fun.) *3rd September 1998*.

Franklin, Sarah B. **Daughter of Troy: A Novel of History, Valor and Love.** Avon, ISBN 0-380-79353-9, ix+416pp, C-format paperback, \$13. (Historical novel, first edition; a retelling of *The Iliad*, this is a debut novel by a new Canadian writer [the reverse-of-title-page statement says "Copyright 1998 by D. J. Duncan"]; the narrator-heroine is Achilles' moll Briseis, not the more usual Priam's daughter Cassandra [as in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Firebrand* (1987) and many other novels]; it contains a Mary Renault-style afterword listing sources, etc, which is a fairly clear indication that it probably isn't a fantasy but an attempt at serious archaeo-historical reconstruction; alas, much historical fiction these days, especially the kind that deals with the ancient world, seems to be regarded by publishers and booksellers as a sub-set of fantasy.) *May 1998*.

Green, Sharon. **Challenges: Book Three of The Blending.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-78809-8, 378pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tom Canty, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Convergence* [1996], which we were sent, and *Competitions* [1997?], which we never saw; like the author's early DAW Books titles of the 1980s, which seemed to be an attempt to

jump on the John Norman bandwagon, it contains elements of softcore sadomasochism: "The woman writhed and whimpered and squirmed every time the strop cracked across her blazing red bottom, a clear signal of just how deeply in need she was" [page 172].) *May 1998*.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **Burnt Offerings.** "Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00524-1, 392pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee MacLeod, \$6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; this appears to be the seventh title in the author's dark fantasy/crime crossover series which began with *Guilty Pleasures* [1993].) *May 1998*.

Harris, Steve. **The Devil on May Street.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60162-0, 381pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1997.) *21st May 1998*.

Harrison, Harry. **Stars and Stripes Forever: Stars and Stripes Trilogy, Book One.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-68918-8, 323pp, A-format paperback, cover by David A. Hardy, £5.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first published in 1998; this paperback is appearing barely two months after the hardcover; about a 19th-century war-which-never-happened between Britain and the USA, it's dedicated, "with immense gratitude," to editor Nick Austin – who, unfortunately, is no longer with Hodder/NEL.) *21st May 1998*.

Hoh, Diane. **The Initiation.** "Nightmare Hall." Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-19990-0, 189pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) *May 1998*.

Holdstock, Robert. **Mythago Wood.** Voyager, ISBN 0-586-06585-7, 319pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1984; the book which began the whole of Holdstock's now-celebrated "Ryhope Wood" cycle – a modern classic; eighth Grafton/Harper-Collins/Voyager printing, with new cover art by Howe.) *May (?) 1998*.

Jablokov, Alexander. **Deepdrive.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97636-6, 311pp, hardcover, cover by J. K. Potter, \$14. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's one of Avon's small-format, commendably cheap hardcovers; the accompanying publicity quotes Allen Steele to the effect that "Deepdrive is radical hard sf at its best.") *5th August 1998*.

Keyes, J. Gregory. **The Blackgod: Chosen of the Changeling, Book Two.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41880-8, 494pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tom Kidd, \$6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) *1st May 1998*.

Kilworth, Garry. **Land-of-Mists: Book III of The Navigator Kings.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-559-2, xvi+380pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; conclusion of the Polynesian trilogy.) *7th May 1998*.

Kilworth, Garry. **The Princely Flower: Book II of The Navigator Kings.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-560-6, xvi+365pp, A-

format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1997; reviewed by Gwyneth Jones in *Interzone* 122.) 7th May 1998.

Koontz, Dean. **Fear Nothing**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-5832-5, 501pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA [?], 1997; reviewed by Pete Crowther in *Interzone* 129.) 4th June 1998.

Kress, Nancy. **Beaker's Dozen**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86537-6, 349pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; it contains, as the title implies, 13 stories, all reprints of the 1990s, mostly from Asimov's SF and Omni; among them is her well-known novella "Beggars in Spain" [1991], which formed the basis of a whole trilogy of novels; a back-cover quote compares the author to H. G. Wells.) August 1998.

Lawhead, Stephen R. **Grail: Book V of the Pendragon Cycle**. Lion, ISBN 0-7459-3883-3, 374pp, A-format paperback, cover by Eric Peterson and Mike Posen, £5.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; the final volume in the series by this British-based American author which began some years ago with *Taliesin*, *Merlin*, *Arthur* and *Pendragon*.) 15th May 1998.

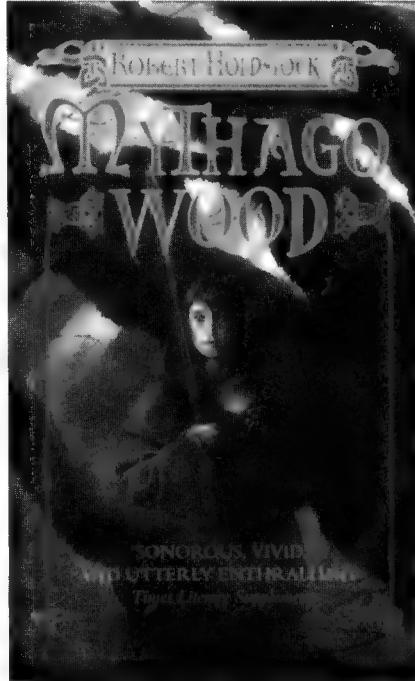
Lee, Adam. **The Shadow Eater: Book Two of The Dominions of Irth**. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79073-4, xiii+334pp, trade paperback, \$13. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; possibly first published in the UK by Hodder & Stoughton under the author's real name, A. A. Attanasio, as was volume one of the trilogy in 1996 – though, if so, we never received a review copy.) Late entry: April publication, received in May 1998.

Lee, Tanith. **The Book of the Dead: The Secret Books of Paradys, III**. Overlook Press [distributed in Britain by Turnaround, Unit 3 Olympia Trading Estate, Coburg Rd., London N22 6TZ], ISBN 0-87951-798-0, 215pp, trade paperback, cover by Wayne Barlowe, £8.99. (Collection of linked fantasy stories, first published in the USA, 1991; described by the publishers as "surpassing Anne Rice's Vampire novels in decadence and dark atmosphere"; the first two volumes of the series were published in the UK by Unwin in the late 1980s, but volumes three and four presumably bit the dust when Unwin was taken over by HarperCollins, and so have appeared only in these American editions; this is the original US paperback edition with a UK price added – not actually a new printing, but being made newly available in Britain on the stated date.) 4th June 1998.

Lee, Tanith. **The Book of the Mad: The Secret Books of Paradys, IV**. Overlook Press [distributed in Britain by Turnaround, Unit 3 Olympia Trading Estate, Coburg Rd., London N22 6TZ], ISBN 0-87951-799-9, 209pp, trade paperback, cover by Wayne Barlowe, £8.99. (Collection of linked fantasy stories, first published in the USA, 1993; the original US paperback edition with a UK price

added; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 75; "one of TL's finest texts," according to "JC" in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* [1997].) 4th June 1998.

Le Fanu, J. Sheridan. **Carmilla**. Sarob Press [Brynderwen, 41 Forest View, Mountain Ash, Mid-Glamorgan CF45 3DU], ISBN 1-902309-00-6, 83pp, hardcover, £13. (Horror novella, first serialized in an obscure Victorian periodical called *The Dark Blue*, December 1871–March 1872; this is a collectors' edition of the classic vampire story, with a gold-embossed cover and no dustjacket, limited to 200 copies; it comes from a new "quality" small press whose second book, announced for this summer, will be an original collection by a living author.) No date shown: received in May 1998.



Leonard, Elmore. **Touch**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-026248-2, viii+245pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy/crime novel, first published in the USA, 1987; this is a film tie-in reissue of the author's only fantasy, about a man with mysterious healing powers; in a two-page preface he tells us how it was written in 1977 and then took ten years to get published because it was regarded as out-of-genre; it has been fascinating to watch Elmore Leonard's reputation grow over the decades: born in 1925, he began as a 1940s pulpster, then wrote paperback-original westerns in the 1950s, before turning to his now-distinctive brand of crime fiction in the 1960s; it wasn't until the 1970s that he rose above the ruck, and it was in the 1980s that his career really soared, to such an extent that people like Martin Amis have said things like this of him: "Elmore Leonard is a literary genius who writes re-readable thrillers"; now, in the 1990s, everybody is scrambling to make movies of his books – even the minor ones like this.) 28th May 1998.

McAuley, Paul J. **Ancient of Days: The Second Book of Confluence**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06428-5, 320pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 3rd September 1998.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Freedom's Choice**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00531-4, 327pp, A-format paperback, cover by Romas Kukalis, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK [?], 1997; sequel to *Freedom's Landing*; in Britain these books are known as the "Catteni sequence," but that labelling is not present here.) June 1998.

Martin, Thomas K. **The Time of Madness: MageLord**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00533-0, 244pp, A-format paperback, cover by Duane O. Myers, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; second in the trilogy which began with *The Awakening* [1997]; a Locus quote on the back cover describes the series as "a rarity these days... unabashed guy-fantasy, with lots of medieval-style battles and castle-sieges.") June 1998.

Merchant, Rex. **The Tomatoes of Time: The Runford Chronicles, Book Two**. Norman Cottage [89 West Rd., Oakham, Rutland LE15 6LT], ISBN 1-902474-00-7, 196pp, small-press paperback, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; by a new British author, it's a follow-up to his *The Faerie Stone* [1997], which we didn't see.) 1st June 1998.

Miller, Walter M., Jr. [with Terry Bisson]. **Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-561-4, 566pp, A-format paperback, cover by Matt Zumbo, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; reviewed by David Seed in *Interzone* 126.) 7th May 1998.

Modestoff, L. E., Jr. **The Ghost of the Revelator**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86426-4, 303pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the incredibly prolific Modestoff keeps three or four different series on the go at the same time; two of them are fantasy: this is one of his sf ones, set in an alternate-timeline America, follow-up to *Of Tangible Ghosts* [1994]; it is his third new hardcover novel so far this year and, at a "mere" 303 pages, the smallest of them.) September 1998.

Newman, Sharan. **Guinevere Evermore**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86641-0, 277pp, trade paperback, cover by William Morris, \$13.95. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1985; third in the trilogy which began with *Guinevere* [1981] and *The Chessboard Queen* [1983].) 15th May 1998.

Niles, Douglas. **War of the Three Waters**. "Book Three of the Watershed Trilogy." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00532-2, 422pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ciruelo Cabral, \$6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997.) June 1998.

Niven, Larry. **Destiny's Road**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-548-7, ix+438pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1997; reviewed by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 123.) 7th May 1998.



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Nylund, Eric S. *Signal to Noise*. "A hyperpunk novel." Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97513-0, 371pp, hardcover, cover by Amy Halperin, \$23. (Sf novel, first edition; the author's three previous books were more fantasy than sf; in this one, set in the late 21st century, he seems to be invading William Gibson territory.) May 1998.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *Murders in the Rue Morgue & Other Stories*. "Tales to astonish." Pulp Fictions [PO Box 144, Polegate, East Sussex BN26 6NW], ISBN 1-902058-02-X, 319pp, B-format paperback, cover by Tom Paddle, £4.99. (Horror/crime collection, first published in various editions in the 1840s; this, which is surely stretching the definition of "pulp fictions," contains eight well-known tales by Poe, concentrating on his detective stories, including the title piece and the other two tales featuring that rather bloodless precursor of Sherlock Holmes, the Chevalier Dupin, plus the memorable long story "The Gold-Bug"; the print is large, and it's presumably photo-reproduced from some old, out-of-copyright edition [unspecified]; it's perhaps unfair to point out [but for readers' sakes let's do so] that the same month, April 1998, brought a paperback *Selected Tales of Poe* from Oxford University Press, priced at a remarkable £2.50, and containing all these same stories plus many others together with a scholarly introduction and notes by David Van Leer – unfortunately this was not sent to us for review, and we're indebted to Ian Covell's *Locus* listing for the information.) Late entry: April publication, received in May 1998.

Powers, Tim. *Earthquake Weather*. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-623-8, 565pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Campion, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1997; sequel to *Expiration Date*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 124.) 7th May 1998.

Preston, Lincoln. *Reliquary*. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50633-1, 512pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Alexander, £5.99. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1997; a follow-up to *Relic*, which was filmed; "Lincoln Preston" is a pseudonym for Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child.) 11th June 1998.

Pullman, Philip. *The Subtle Knife: His Dark Materials, Book Two*. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-41336-9, 288pp, A-format paperback, cover by Eric Peterson, \$5.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1997; this is the follow-up to the much-praised *Northern Lights* [1995; published in the USA as *The Golden Compass*], which won the Carnegie Medal, the *Guardian Children's Fiction Award* and goodness knows what else.) May 1998.

Rickman, Phil. *The Chalice*. "A Glastonbury ghost story." Pan, ISBN 0-330-34267-3, 646pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1997; it owes something to the works of horror novelist and mystic Dion Fortune [Violet Mary Firth, 1890-1946], who is quoted liberally throughout; reviewed by Chris

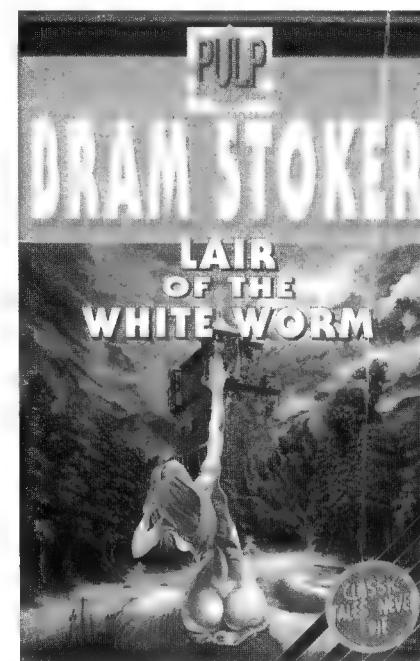
Gilmore in *Interzone* 122 ["an excellent book in all aspects"]; there is also a new hardcover novel by Rickman, *The Wine of Angels*, published by Macmillan simultaneously with this, but they seem to have neglected to send us that one – nevertheless we hope to be running a review of it by Gilmore, next issue.) 19th June 1998.

Routley, Jane. *Fire Angels*. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79425-X, vii+436pp, trade paperback, cover by Donato, \$13. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; the author is Australian, currently living in Denmark; Avon do not claim it as a first edition, so it's possible this book, which is a sequel to another called *Mage Heart*, had a prior Australian edition.) June 1998.

Shelley, Rick. *Officer-Cadet*. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00526-8, 281pp, A-format paperback, cover by Duane O. Myers, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; militaristic space-opera stuff, described as "the explosive new novel of the Dirigent Mercenary Corps.") May 1998.

Slonczewski, Joan. *The Children Star*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86716-6, 351pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; fairly hard biological sf by a practising scientist, it's set in the same universe as her much earlier novels *A Door into Ocean* [1986] and *Daughter of Elysium* [1993].) September 1998.

Stableford, Brian. *Inherit the Earth*. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-86493-0, 320pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a biotech thriller, it's a considerable expansion of a novella of the same title which appeared in *Analog*, July 1995 [Stableford's only contribution to that august magazine? – it must have pleased him to appear there, for historical reasons].) September 1998.



Stoker, Bram. *The Lair of the White Worm*. "Classic tales never die." Pulp Fictions [PO Box 144, Polegate, East Sussex BN26 6NW], ISBN 1-902058-01-1, 191pp, B-format paperback, cover by Tom Paddle,

£4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1911; the cover drops the first definite article from the title, as did the same publisher's edition of Rider Haggard's *The People of the Mist* [see listing last month] – we wish they wouldn't do that.) Late entry: April publication, received in May 1998.

Stover, Matthew Woodring. *Heroes Die*. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42104-3, 563pp, trade paperback, cover by Douglas Beckman, \$12.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; we haven't heard of this author before, but apparently this is his third novel, following *Jericho Moon* and *Iron Dawn*; people like A. A. Attanasio, Dave Duncan and Janny Wurts praise him highly; is he any relation to the critic and anthologist Leon Stover [born 1929], who once wrote a novel called *The Shaving of Karl Marx: An Instant Novel of Ideas, After the Manner of Thomas Love Peacock, in Which Lenin and H. G. Wells Talk About the Political Meaning of the Scientific Romances* [1982]?) August 1998.

Tepper, Sheri S. *The Family Tree*. Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-79197-8, 480pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel; first published in the USA, 1997.) May 1998.

Warren, Bill. *Keep Watching the Skies!: American Science Fiction Movies of the Fifties*. In two volumes bound together. Volume I: 1950-1957. Volume II: 1958-1962. McFarland Classics [distributed in Britain by Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-7864-0479-5, xvi+467+xx+839pp, trade paperback, £31.50. (Illustrated chronological critique of sf/horror films over a crucial 13-year span ["the Fifties" – and not just American: British, Japanese and other films released in the USA are included here too]; first published in the USA in separate volumes, 1982 and 1986; this is the American single-volume reissue of 1997 with a British price added; a legendary labour of love, at more than 1,300 text-heavy pages this is probably the biggest work on sf films ever published [even though it covers what now seems a narrow time-slot]; warm, nostalgic, incredibly detailed, it's the indispensable book to have if you are interested in American sf cinema from *Destination Moon* [1950] to *Panic in Year Zero* [1962]; commended on the back cover by Joe Dante, Harlan Ellison, John Landis and others.) 23rd June 1998.

Welch, Jane. *The Lament of Abalone*. "Volume One of The Book of Ond." Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-01787-X, 450pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; although it opens a new sequence, it's set in the same world as the author's debut trilogy, the "Runespell" books published by HarperCollins/Voyager.) June 1998.

Williams, Conrad. *Head Injuries*. "Frontlines." The Do-Not Press [PO Box 4215, London SE23 2QD], ISBN 1-899344-36-5, 206pp, trade paperback, £5. (Horror novel, first edition; a debut novel by a well-known British small-press writer [born 1969], it's commended by Ramsey



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Campbell as "one of the finest and most haunting modern spectral novels I've read"; The Do-Not Press, which publishes a good deal of crime fiction in its companion "Bloodlines" series, and which previously released a horror/fantasy collection by the king of the Miserabilists, Christopher Kenworthy, advertises itself as being devoted to "fiercely independent publishing.") Late entry: 30th April publication, received in May 1998.

Williams, Walter Jon. *Frankensteins and Foreign Devils*. Edited by Timothy P. Szczezul. Introduction by Gardner Dozois. Illustrations by Omar Rayyan. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 1-886778-04-4, 379pp, hardcover, cover by Rayyan, \$23. (Sf collec-

Blum, Jonathan, and Kate Orman. **Seeing I. "Doctor Who."** BBC Books, 0-563-40586-4, 279pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; "featuring the Eighth Doctor and Sam.") 1st June 1998.

Briggs-Wallace, Emerson, with Steve Smith. **Dining on Babylon 5: The Ultimate Collection of Space Station Cuisine.** "Human edition." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-1143-9, 128pp, large-format paperback, £14.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff cookbook, first edition [?]; illustrated throughout; "Emerson Briggs-Wallace," it seems, is a fictional character.) 19th June 1998.

Cunningham, Elaine. **Evermeet: Island of Elves.** "Forgotten Realms." TSR, ISBN 0-7869-0713-4, 456pp, hardcover, cover by Ciruelo Cabral, \$21.95. (Shared-world roleplaying-game-spinoff fantasy novel, first edition; TSR have been churning out books of this sort for about 15 years [and this is author Cunningham's eighth title for them], but never, in all that time, have they thought to send this magazine review copies; we do believe this is the first TSR novel we have ever seen in its original state [as opposed to the British reprints which Penguin used to do]; but the world sometimes does change: TSR, Inc., has now been taken over by the trading-card company Wizards of the Coast, Inc., and clearly the new management is trying to get the company's book-products better known outside their [admittedly very large] core audience.) Late entry: April publication, received in May 1998.

Greenwood, Ed, and Jeff Grubb. **Cormyr: A Novel.** "Forgotten Realms." TSR, ISBN 0-7869-0710-X, 486pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ciruelo Cabral, \$6.99. (Shared-world roleplaying-game-spinoff fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) Late entry: April publication, received in May 1998.

Jeter, K. W. **The Mandalorian Armor: The Bounty Hunter Wars, Book One.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50601-3, 387pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1998; Jeter moves from the *Blade Runner* franchise, which he had to himself, to the overpopulated but no doubt more lucrative *Star Wars* universe...) 11th June 1998.

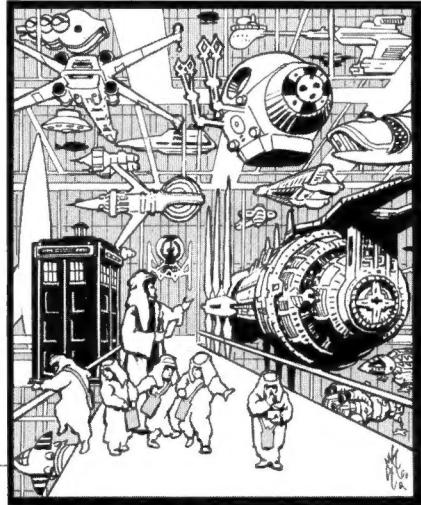
tion, first edition; there is a simultaneous signed, slipcased edition [not seen]; published to commemorate Williams's Guest-of-Honourship at the 1998 Boskone, and a nicely-produced volume, it contains ten stories, two of which are original; there are no overlaps with his previous collection, *Facets* [1990] – referred to as "Tangents" on the back cover: we think the NESFA blurb-writers are confusing their Guest of Honour with Greg Bear; several of the stories are alternate-world efforts, including one, "Red Elvis," which is just what the title implies – the tale of Elvis Presley, socialist leader – and another, "Wall, Stone, Craft," which is about the Lord Byron-Percy Shelley-Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin ménage; a lively collection, recom-

mended to all Kim Newman and Howard Waldrop fans.) No date shown: received in May 1998.

Zindell, David. **War in Heaven: Book Three of A Requiem for Homo Sapiens.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224297-4, 618pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £11.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; in a passing remark in his recent *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*, Tom Disch said that Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* [1980-1983] was an inimitable masterpiece which could not have much influence on the wider sf field; well, Disch was wrong: Zindell has succeeded in being influenced by it in this impressive philosophical space-opera trilogy.) 15th June 1998.

Spinoffery

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.



McIntee, David A. **Mission Impractical.** "Doctor Who." BBC Books, 0-563-40592-9, 280pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; on the cover, the title has a colon separating the two words, but it's not so on the title page; "featuring the Sixth Doctor and Frofisher" – the latter being a shape-shifting penguin who first appeared in a *Doctor Who Magazine* comic strip.) 1st June 1998.

Meisler, Andy. **I Want to Believe: The Official Guide to The X-Files.** "Volume 3." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-255883-1, 302pp, trade paperback, £10.99. (Illustrated episode guide to the sf/horror TV series created by Chris Carter, first published in the USA, 1998; a follow-up to earlier volumes entitled *Trust No One* and *The Truth is Out There*; are we imagining it, or has the

enormous vogue for *The X-Files* suddenly collapsed into near-invisibility in the past few months? one no longer seems to see Mulder's and Scully's faces everywhere.) No date shown: received in May 1998.

Richards, Thomas. **Star Trek in Myth and Legend.** Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-645-4, viii+180pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. ("Literary" study of the sf TV series and its spinoffs; first published in 1997; at first glance it looks like sub-Joseph Campbell mythico-religious tripe, but then one notices that the author, a former Harvard University lecturer, has previously written a couple of serious works, *The Commodity Culture in Victorian Britain* [1990] and *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* [1993; this latter contained an amazing chapter which yoked together books by Lewis Carroll, Bram Stoker and J. G. Ballard].) 4th May 1998.

Rogin, Michael. **Independence Day, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Enola Gay.** "BFI Modern Classics." BFI Publishing, ISBN 0-85170-662-2, 96pp, small trade paperback, £7.99. (Illustrated study of the sf movie *Independence Day*, first edition; this, the first British Film Institute book we have ever been sent for review, is one of an attractive series of little volumes about particular films of recent years; the present example, by a Californian professor of politics, is clearly-written, imaginative and stimulating – and devoted to a popular sf film which hitherto has been underestimated critically; recommended; unfortunately, there's no accompanying list of earlier titles in the series, but we would guess there must have been quite a few of sf or fantasy interest – *Blade Runner*, almost certainly, and the *Terminator* movies, perhaps?) 21st May 1998.

Weis, Margaret, and Tracy Hickman, eds. **Relics & Omens: Tales of the Fifth Age.** "DragonLance Saga." TSR, ISBN 0-7869-1169-7, 338pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jeff Easley, \$5.99. (Shared-world roleplaying-game-spinoff fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains original stories by Nancy Varian Berberick, Jeff Grubb, Richard A. Knaak, Roger E. Moore, Douglas Niles, Paul B. Thompson and others.) Late entry: April publication, received in May 1998.

THE WRAP PARTY, 21st to 24th August 1998. A fan-run science-fiction convention to celebrate the end of the arc of *Babylon 5*. Confirmed guests include J. Michael Straczynski, Harlan Ellison, James White, Bryan Talbot, Jack Cohen and "NASA Hubble specialist." Membership £70 until July 1998, £80 on the door. The Wrap Party, PO Box 505, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 7QZ. *TheWrapParty@steamradio.com* <http://www.steamradio.com/TheWrapParty>

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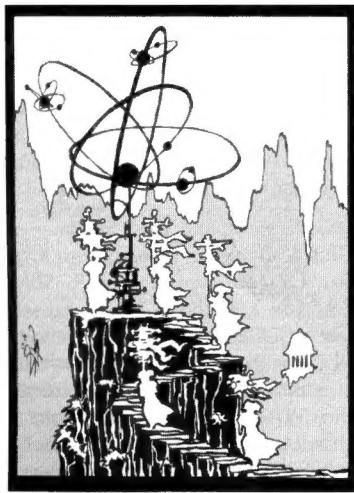
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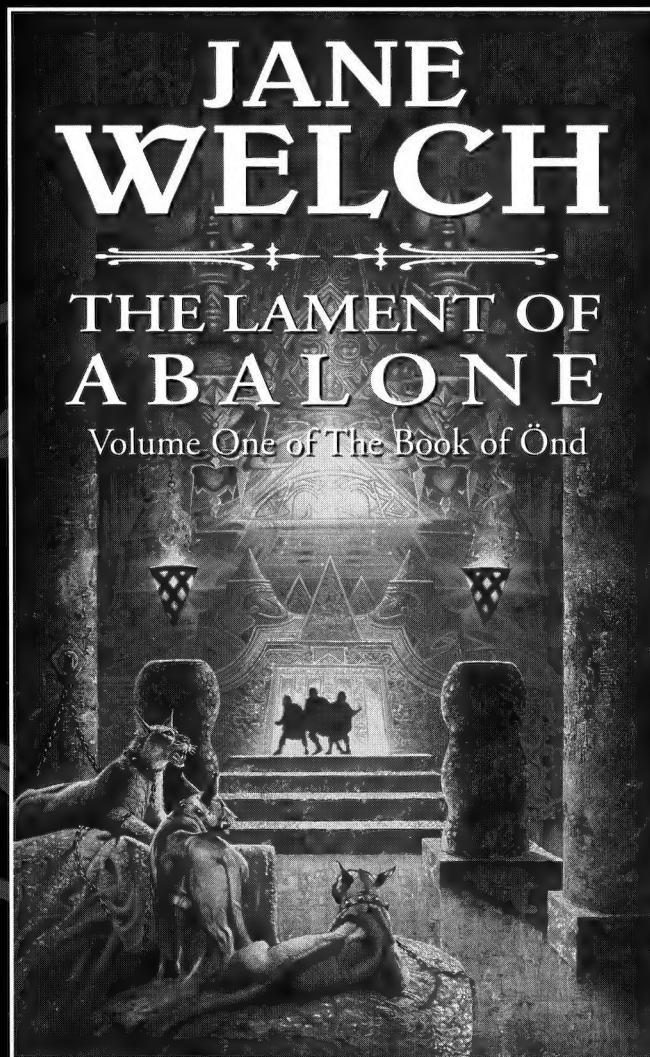
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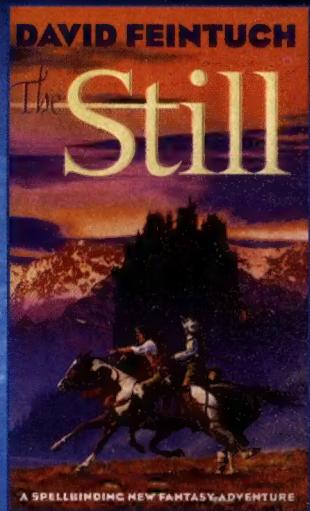
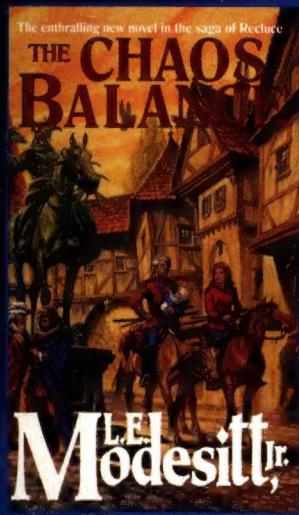
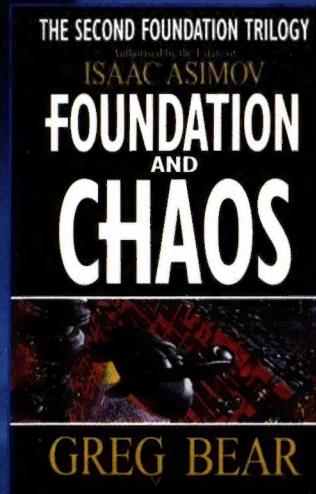
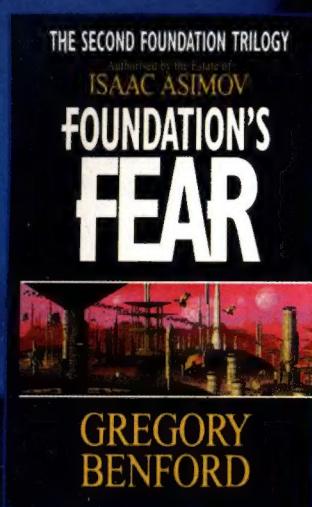
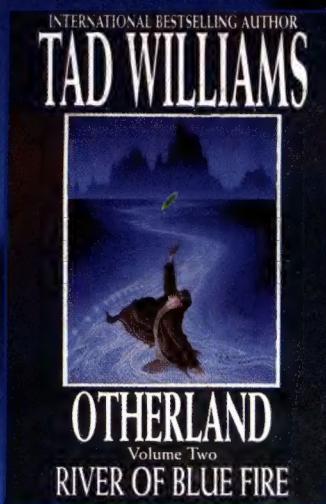
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